



Darcy Moments
Book Two

Being
Mr. Darcy

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

GRACE
HOLLISTER

Being Mr. Darcy (Darcy Moments Book Two)

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Grace Hollister



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Chapter 1

Elizabeth breezed into the Pemberley parlor, where she found

Mr. Darcy staring out the window as though he were able to see what lay beyond. Unfortunately, there was yet no hope that he would regain his eyesight.

“Good morning, dear husband,” Elizabeth said, approaching him and wrapping her arms around him from behind. “One of the servants notified me that you had arrived. You should have come to see me right away.”

“I arrived too early. I did not wish to wake you.” Mr. Darcy turned around and tightened his own arms around Elizabeth so that she was able to feel his heart beating along with hers. He pulled her even closer, holding her for a long time as he pressed his nose into her hair and breathed in her scent.

They had been married for three years now, and Elizabeth’s heart still warmed at his touch. “I have missed you so, my darling,” Elizabeth said as a smile curled her lips, and she closed her eyes to better relish her husband’s presence. Pemberley never felt quite like home when he was not present. Even with a house full of servants, Elizabeth still felt alone and incomplete when Mr. Darcy was not present.

“Not as much as I have missed you,” Mr. Darcy murmured into her hair.

“Are you certain of that?” Elizabeth teased, breaking the embrace and gazing into Mr. Darcy’s face. “Or are you simply telling me the words you believe I want to hear?”

“Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy,” Mr. Darcy said slowly. “You know I miss you even when you are in the next room.” It was true. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth enjoyed as much time together as possible. It confirmed their deep affection for each other and reminded Elizabeth that choosing Mr. Darcy as her husband had been the right decision. Whenever they did not share the same space for a long period of time, they often went in search of each other.

“Very well.” Elizabeth raised her lips to Mr. Darcy’s, enjoying the feel of his warm breath on her skin. “I am glad you missed me,” she

whispered. "You happen to be very lucky to have me for a wife."

Mr. Darcy chuckled and held Elizabeth by the shoulders, his hands warming her skin, making her heart beat even faster. "I am aware of that, my dear." He smiled. "How have you been faring during my absence?"

Elizabeth's smile wavered and she averted her gaze even though Mr. Darcy was unable to see her eyes. "Quite well," she lied.

Like any new wife, Elizabeth had hoped that the first three years of their marriage would be filled with only wedded bliss, but her inability to conceive a child for Mr. Darcy had robbed her of much joy and peace of mind. Mr. Darcy was understanding and never once blamed her, but Elizabeth could not help but feel as if she had failed him and herself. With each month that passed, she held on to the hope that they would finally be blessed with a son or daughter, but time and time again their hopes were dashed.

"Why do I not believe you?" A deep line formed between Mr. Darcy's eyebrows. "Is something the matter?" Mr. Darcy loved Elizabeth so dearly that if there was even a slight chance that she was unwell or pained in any way, he made it his responsibility to raise her spirits.

"I do not wish to worry you." Elizabeth stepped away from him, wrapping her arms around her body. "The truth is, I have been dreadfully tired lately. I'm not sure why that may be."

"You're not falling ill, are you?" Mr. Darcy took a step toward her. Despite his inability to see, he followed her voice and her scent as he always did in order to find her. "I feel terrible for leaving you alone for so many days."

"Nonsense." Elizabeth took Mr. Darcy's arm and guided him toward one of the sofas. "I'm glad you went to see a doctor. Did he have any pleasant news to share with you?" Every few months, Mr. Darcy visited an eye specialist in London, and each time Elizabeth was hopeful that there would at last be a promising development. She hoped that one day he would have the pleasure of seeing their child come into the world.

Mr. Darcy's face fell, and Elizabeth sensed his unhappiness. "I'm afraid not. There were no signs that I would ever be capable of seeing again."

Elizabeth's heart sank as she lowered herself onto the sofa next to Mr. Darcy. She loved him, and she would continue to love him with or without his eyesight. However, she was well aware that his blindness tormented him even when he did his best to hide that fact from her.

She placed a hand on his, leaning into him to offer him comfort. "It does not matter," she whispered. "I still love you. I will always love you."

"I have never doubted your love for me, my darling." Some of the tension melted from Mr. Darcy's features. "I only wish I could see your beauty."

"I know you do." A bittersweet smile touched Elizabeth's lips. "But you should know that you see me more deeply than anyone ever has. You see into my soul." She lay a hand on his cheek. "Your blindness does not in any way make you less whole, not to me."

"You complete me." Mr. Darcy kissed Elizabeth. "As long as I have you by my side, I shall feel whole."

Elizabeth swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and kissed Mr. Darcy again. Sometimes words were not enough to express her feelings for him. When she pulled away, her vision was blurred from the tears in her eyes. She blinked them away and forced a smile. "Please say you will join me for breakfast. Or have you already eaten?"

Mr. Darcy shook his head. "Not yet. I had hoped to eat with you." He pushed himself to his feet and stretched his hand toward Elizabeth. Instead of using his walking stick, he allowed her to guide him out of the parlor and into the dining room, which smelled of freshly baked bread.

The moment Elizabeth walked into the room, sorrow closed her throat. Each time they took a meal at the big wooden table in the center of the room, she felt oppressed by the emptiness surrounding them. Sometimes it hung so heavily in the air it made it hard for her to breathe.

Every time Elizabeth called upon Jane at Netherfield Park, she enjoyed the sounds of small feet and the kind of undiluted laughter that could only come from children. While Elizabeth often worried she might never experience such joy, each of her sisters, except for Kitty who was still unmarried, were blessed with children of their own.

"You're terribly quiet," Mr. Darcy said when their breakfast had been served and he lifted his cup of tea to his lips. "Am I wrong in thinking something is troubling you? Or do you still feel unwell? Perhaps we should ask Dr. Crew to examine you."

Elizabeth lifted her own cup to her lips and carefully sipped the hot liquid. "You should not concern yourself with my well-being, my darling. In your absence, I experienced nothing more than occasional weariness. I am quite sure it is nothing to worry about."

"Are you certain you're not—"

"With child?" Elizabeth whispered. The thought had crossed her mind, but she had not called for Dr. Crew, so as not to raise her hopes only to have them shattered yet again. The last time Dr. Crew called on them was seven months ago when Elizabeth had suffered a miscarriage after only two months of pregnancy, that had sent her

plunging into the depths of depression. She recovered with Mr. Darcy's help, but she would forever live with the scars left behind by the loss of a child, even one she had not had the pleasure to meet. "I do not believe so. You need not worry. I feel quite all right at present."

"That is good to hear, but I must say I would feel more at ease if you were examined." From the gentleness of his tone, Elizabeth could tell that he was hopeful, but he was doing his best to be patient and understanding.

The behavior was in direct opposition to Mrs. Bennet's, who brought up the subject in every conversation she had with Elizabeth. For that reason, Elizabeth had not visited Longbourn for over three months.

She had never been quite comfortable being in her mother's company. First, Mrs. Bennet had pressured her into marrying a wealthy husband, and as soon as that was achieved, she demanded that Elizabeth bear a child as soon as possible. When that did not happen as quickly as she liked, Mrs. Bennet bombarded Elizabeth with advice on how she could speed up the process of conceiving, warning that if she did not provide Mr. Darcy with an heir, he might be forced to stray.

The thought of having her husband stray had never been something that concerned Elizabeth all too much. She was confident that the bond she had with Mr. Darcy was much stronger than he could have with any other woman. It did, however, pain her to think that Mrs. Bennet would say such dreadful things to her own daughter. Then again, Elizabeth knew that her mother was prone to such blunders, and would likely never change.

Sometimes Elizabeth wondered whether the reason she was not conceiving was due to the pressure others placed on her, especially Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet, on the other hand, assured her mother that Elizabeth would bring a child into the world when fortune permitted, but Mrs. Bennet would not hear of it. She seemed to believe that the power to conceive was solely in a woman's hands.

Watching her husband sitting across from her, concern etched in his features, Elizabeth knew she had to provide him relief. "Very well," she said, pressing her napkin to her lips. "If it would allay your worry, I shall see Dr. Crew. I suppose it couldn't hurt."

"It would certainly bring a smile to my face." The corners of Mr. Darcy's mouth turned up as if to prove it. "If it is all right with you, I shall send the footman to fetch the doctor as soon as we finish breakfast."

"Of course. I shall be ready for him." Elizabeth paused. "I know you wish he would discover that I am with child, but what if that is

not the case?" She felt the need to prepare Mr. Darcy for possible disappointment.

"Then we shall continue praying and wishing," he said, reaching for a slice of freshly baked bread. "But you should always remember that I married you for love, Elizabeth Darcy, and if we never produce an heir, my love for you will never lessen."

Elizabeth was deeply comforted by his words. Many unions shattered when an heir was not produced soon after the marriage, but she and Mr. Darcy held on to the true love they had discovered, in spite of their struggles. Their bond was special, and it healed any pain they encountered along the way.

"I love you just as much as you love me and that will never change." Elizabeth said, reaching for his hands.

A silence followed, broken only by the sound of the kitchen servants clearing up the table, and Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth found comfort in each other's presence. After some time, one of the servants provided Elizabeth with a newspaper, which she read aloud to Mr. Darcy as she did every morning after breakfast.

She was fortunate to have Mr. Darcy as a husband. He allowed her to keep herself informed about politics and goings-on in the rest of England and the world. Sometimes, he even asked her to accompany him to political meetings that should have been reserved only for gentlemen.

There was never a day Elizabeth doubted that marrying Mr. Darcy had been the right choice, that he was the perfect match for her. However, she wished so much she could give him something that he wanted so dearly. He deserved so much more joy than she alone was capable of offering him.

When the footman left Pemberley to summon Dr. Crew, she secretly wished with all her heart that he would confirm that she was with child. She prayed the time had come for her to finally give Mr. Darcy an heir.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth held her breath as she waited for Dr. Crew to share the results with them. He had already examined her and was now putting away his equipment.

His silence made Elizabeth believe what he had to say was unpleasant, and her stomach twisted with anxiety.

No matter. She had become so accustomed to disappointment that she had come to expect it.

"Is something the matter, Doctor?" Mr. Darcy asked, perhaps sensing the tension in the room. While the doctor had examined Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy had paced the room, his walking stick clicking on the floor as he went. He now stood facing the bed, his features clouded with concern.

Prior to Doctor Crew's arrival, Mr. Darcy had assured Elizabeth it would not matter if they did not receive the news they hoped for, but Elizabeth had still read the hope in his expression.

Doctor Crew straightened to his full height and removed his spectacles, cleaning them with a handkerchief. His hesitation gave Elizabeth her answer. She was not with child. As her heart sank within her breast, she let go of the breath she had been holding and leaned back against the pillows.

"Go on, Doctor," Mr. Darcy said again, impatient. "Tell us what you have discovered."

"I have good and bad news." Doctor Crew cleared his throat and replaced his glasses on his face. "The good news is, Mrs. Darcy is a picture of health. The less pleasant news is that I found no signs that she is carrying a child."

Even though Elizabeth had anticipated the doctor's words, even if she had already read the truth on his face, the message still crushed her to the point she struggled to breathe. After taking a moment to pull herself together, she swallowed the lump that lingered inside her throat.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said. Her voice had strength to it, but it was cracked around the edges.

In a voice that sounded much like Elizabeth's, albeit much deeper,

Mr. Darcy thanked the doctor as well.

While the housekeeper, Mrs. Brooks, escorted Doctor Crew to the door, Mr. Darcy made his way to the bed and sat beside his wife.

"You do recall my words to you before the doctor's arrival?" He rested his cane on the edge of the bed and took Elizabeth's hand in his own. "The absence of a pregnancy does not change anything. We shall continue living our life as before. We should be glad that you are healthy."

Elizabeth placed her free hand on her stomach. "Only it would have been so much more pleasant if we had received news of a baby. The sounds of a child would bring such life to the rooms of Pemberley, would they not?"

"Perhaps. But should we not be blessed with offspring, I shall be satisfied with hearing the sound of your voice and your laughter. And I do hope that the absence of a child will not rob Pemberley of such sounds."

Elizabeth lifted herself from the pillows and wrapped her arms around her husband. "How am I so lucky to have you for a husband?"

"I am the lucky one." Mr. Darcy chuckled. "The presence or absence of an heir shall never change that."

"But you know what everyone thinks of me." Elizabeth had never cared much about what people thought of her until she became the main topic of gossip.

Mr. Darcy's body stiffened in her arms. "My darling," he whispered, drawing her nearer, "my main concern about having an heir is to protect you. Should anything happen to me, you shall be taken care of."

Elizabeth swallowed her tears. His words both hurt and soothed her. "What if I *do* get pregnant, but we are blessed with a daughter rather than a son?"

"Then I would do everything in my power to make other arrangements for your security." Mr. Darcy touched Elizabeth's face, his fingers tracing its smooth lines as though learning her by heart. "I should hate to have you suffer in any way."

"But I hope you know that I happen to be quite resilient, and I shall be perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Mr. Darcy chuckled. "Of that I am sure. But as your husband, it is my duty to care for you as long as there is breath in me."

Elizabeth sighed. "In that case, we shall continue to hope."

"That is all we can do," Mr. Darcy said. "Do not allow other people's opinions to make you think less of yourself. All that matters is what I think of you."

"Mr. Darcy, you make me a very happy woman."

"But you started it all, Mrs. Darcy." Mr. Darcy rested both his

palms on Elizabeth's cheeks. "It was you who made me happy first."

"I wish I could make you happier than you already are," Elizabeth whispered, covering his hands with hers, tears clouding her vision.

"At this moment, I am the happiest man there ever was." With those words, Mr. Darcy kissed Elizabeth, and they continued to offer each other the comfort they needed to recover from Doctor Crew's information.

After lunch, Mr. Darcy proposed they visit Netherfield, as Elizabeth had not seen Jane for quite some time and he had some business to discuss with Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth thought it to be a good idea and excitedly prepared herself for the departure.

As they rode side by side in the carriage, she felt both excited and uneasy at the thought of seeing her sister, niece, and nephew. While Elizabeth struggled with conceiving a child, Jane had given birth to healthy, beautiful children. It pained Elizabeth to know that she was the only one of her married sisters incapable of enriching her marriage with offspring.

When they reached Netherfield Park, Jane and Mr. Bingley welcomed them with their usual warmth. All of them enjoyed a wonderful lunch together, and then Elizabeth and Jane retreated to the parlor while the gentlemen went to Mr. Bingley's office to discuss their business. The children were in the care of their governess.

"Lizzie, I have missed you so much," Jane said, accepting a cup of tea from one of the servants.

"It has been too long since we saw one another. I apologize for not coming sooner."

"It is not your fault, my dear sister." Jane took a sip of tea. "How are you feeling?" she asked. Jane was the only one in the Bennet family who knew about Elizabeth's miscarriage. She was the only one that Elizabeth could confide in about her pain.

"The pain of loss is still there," Elizabeth said, giving her sister a bittersweet smile, "but it has dulled enough for me to live with it."

"You are so much braver than I could ever be." Jane shook her head sadly. "But do not lose hope. Your opportunity will come, you know. Some blessings are only delayed."

"I try not to lose hope." Elizabeth lifted her chin. "But as you must expect, some days it is rather difficult—especially when I see the disappointment on my dear husband's face each time he hears I am not with child."

"But you are lucky to have him," Jane said. "He is a very understanding and loving husband, just like my Mr. Bingley."

Elizabeth nodded and sighed. "I fully agree. I believe I would be in so much more pain if I had been married to someone other than Mr. Darcy."

“Someone like Mr. Collins, you mean?” The corners of Jane’s lips lifted and a lock of her blonde hair brushed her shoulders as she tipped her head to the side.

“Exactly.” Elizabeth could not help but laugh. The thought that she could have married Mr. Collins still made her shiver. She could not imagine that he would be as understanding as Mr. Darcy was about the situation. “Thank heavens I made the right decision in choosing a husband.”

“We both did.” Jane’s smile brightened. “We each found our perfect match.”

The two sisters drank their tea in silence, while listening to the children play in the distance. As Elizabeth listened to the giggles and padding of tiny feet on the wooden floor, her heart ached just a little. She would not allow the ache to overwhelm her, though. The sounds that reached her ears came from her sister’s children, her own flesh and blood. She loved Jane with all her heart and would never begrudge her her happiness.

“Have you seen mother lately?” Elizabeth asked.

“I paid them a visit a fortnight ago.”

“I have not laid eyes on them since Christmas,” Elizabeth said, guilt gnawing at her. She had been unable to muster up the courage to face them following her miscarriage, even if they had no knowledge that she was expecting at the time. The person she wished to see the most was her papa, who had visited frequently before Elizabeth withdrew. She had to call on them soon or her longing for his embrace would become unbearable.

“Do not blame yourself,” Jane said. “You have your own life now, and you were also working to overcome a terrible trial. You should take as much time as you need before you face mother. I cannot bear the idea of her putting even more pressure on you.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot stay in hiding for long. It is only a matter of time before she calls on us. In fact, am quite surprised she has not already done so. Although I have been quite fatigued lately, I feel well enough to face her.”

“You have been suffering from tiredness?” Elizabeth noticed the sliver of hope in her sister’s eyes. “Could it be you are—”

Elizabeth shook her head sadly. “Do not get ahead of yourself, dear Jane. Doctor Crew called on us this morning. There is no baby in sight.”

“I’m awfully sorry, Lizzie.” Jane let out a long breath. “I wish there was something I could do for you.”

“There is no need for you to be sorry. I’m afraid there’s nothing anyone can do.” Elizabeth leaned back, letting the sofa’s soft fabric embrace her. “Never feel the need to worry about me. Enjoy the

precious gift of your life.”

Jane shook her head. “I do not know how you endure it. How do you cope so well?”

“I do the best I can. I take it one day at the time.” Elizabeth placed her cup and saucer on a nearby table and reached for her sister’s hand. “I have two choices. I can choose to be bitter or I can continue to live my life as best I can. Who knows? Someday, I might wake up to a pleasant surprise.”

“In that case, let us hope that surprise comes to you sooner rather than later.”

“That is my hope as well.” Elizabeth glanced out the window at the manicured gardens. “One of the reasons I wish for a child is for Mr. Darcy’s sake. A child would brighten up his life, even if he cannot see. He deserves so much more joy than I alone can give him. It vexes me that Mr. Wickham, who is responsible for his blindness, continues to live his life without a care in the world while my husband lives in the dark. Surely it cannot be right for someone to cause another so much pain and emerge unscathed.”

“I would not say Mr. Wickham is enjoying his life at present,” Jane said. “I received a letter from Lydia. She said he’s turning more to drink and gambling as their financial situation worsens. Apparently, he gambles away all the money we send her.”

“He is a terrible man.” The last thing Elizabeth wanted to do was make Mr. Wickham’s life more comfortable, especially after everything he had done to Mr. Darcy. Alas, he was married to Lydia.

Mr. Wickham was married before to Caroline Bingley after their scandalous courtship. Two months after Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy celebrated their own wedding, Caroline fell ill with a mysterious illness. Less than four months after that, she died suddenly. Unable to explain her death, many concluded that she died of a broken heart since her husband had been rumored to have several mistresses during their short marriage.

Mr. Wickham did not grieve for long. Not six months had passed when rumors started that he was involved with Lydia Bennet. Lydia confirmed the rumors and revealed that she had fallen in love with Mr. Wickham and would be his second wife, as soon as Mr. Wickham was allowed to remarry.

When the Bennet family disapproved of their union, Lydia and Mr. Wickham eloped. Less than a month later, Lydia announced she was expecting a child.

Instead of finding happiness with Mr. Wickham, Lydia found only heartache. The arrival of another child, not long after the first was born, did not stop Mr. Wickham from straying.

Even though Elizabeth despised Mr. Wickham, she did not intend

on turning her back on her sister; so she secretly sent money—taken from her own allowance—for her and the two children. She hated that Mr. Wickham forbade Lydia from visiting her family, but there was nothing anyone could do. Lydia had begged them not to call on them so as not to anger Mr. Wickham more.

“I only wish Lydia had made a better choice,” Jane said. “But since it was he she chose to spend the rest of her life with, we have to accept it.”

“I suppose you are right.” Elizabeth closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again. “Jane, you and the children should come to Pemberley soon to spend a few nights. I should like to spend more time with them.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Are you sure that would be agreeable? I would not like to cause you any more trouble.”

“Your children are my family. I cannot allow my pain to shun them.” Elizabeth hoped that perhaps if she was surrounded by children more often, she might soon be blessed with her own. “Pemberley would benefit from the laughter of children.”

“Very well. We shall arrange to visit as soon as possible.” Jane embraced Elizabeth and they held on to each other.

Not long after, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley joined them in the parlor. They spent another hour together, and then Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy returned to Pemberley.

After speaking to Jane, Elizabeth felt more determined than ever that she would one day gift Mr. Darcy with an heir. He was a good and kind man. Good things happened to good people, even if they were, at times, delayed.

For now, as they waited, she would not allow her desperation for a child to poison her union with Mr. Darcy.

Chapter 3

The following morning, an unexpected guest arrived at Pemberley, the kind of guest Elizabeth never looked forward to. Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself.

Every time her Ladyship called on them unexpectedly—and it was always unexpectedly—Elizabeth remembered how she had almost ruined her relationship with Mr. Darcy. The memories always came hand in hand with pain.

Elizabeth could not think of a more unfortunate time for her to visit. But of course, she was Mr. Darcy's aunt and there was no way of escaping that fact. Even though Elizabeth had never warmed to her, she did her best to be as civil and accepting of her as possible.

"Elizabeth," Lady Catherine said, feigning excitement as she pulled Elizabeth into her arms. Embraces were meant to be warm and comforting, but Lady Catherine's was cold and unwelcoming.

"Lady Catherine," Elizabeth said, pretending to be overjoyed herself. "What a pleasant surprise to have you calling on us." She pulled away.

Emma, Lady Catherine's maid, went to help Mrs. Brooks prepare Lady Catherine's quarters while Lady Catherine invited Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to the parlor as though the house belonged to her.

"I *do* hope I have not come at an unfortunate time," she said, sitting herself down on the sofa and clasping her hands in her lap, her back ramrod straight, her eyes devoid of emotion.

Elizabeth refrained from responding to her remark and allowed Mr. Darcy to step in.

"I have to say, we would have appreciated a note to inform us of your plans to visit, but since you are here, there is nothing to be done." Much like Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy felt uncomfortable in Lady Catherine's presence. He had once revealed to Elizabeth that he struggled to forgive his aunt for the things she had done prior to their marriage. It was Elizabeth who had pleaded with him to accept her, as she was family and would remain a part of their lives.

It did not, however, mean they had to allow her to walk into their home as she pleased.

“How long do you intend to stay?” Elizabeth asked, unable to hold her tongue. She was the mistress of Pemberley and had every right to know how long a guest of theirs was staying with them.

“I have not decided yet,” Lady Catherine said, her forced smile stretching into a thin line across her face. “I shall remain as long as I feel welcome.”

With those words, Elizabeth remembered the time Lady Catherine had said to her that one should never overstay their welcome. Her Ladyship had been in their home for only a few minutes, and Elizabeth already felt that she had done just that.

Before Elizabeth could say anything more, Mr. Wilson appeared to alert Mr. Darcy to a matter than needed his attention. Mr. Darcy hesitantly rose to his feet and excused himself. He felt uncomfortable leaving Elizabeth with his aunt, fearing that Lady Catherine would say or do something to upset her.

“I shall not be long,” he said and made his way to the door with Mr. Wilson at his side. When he reached the doorway, he stopped for a moment as though he had changed his mind, but then he stepped out of the room.

With him out of sight, Lady Catherine stared at Elizabeth for a long time until Elizabeth almost squirmed with discomfort.

“Why do I get the impression that there is something you would like to say to me?” Elizabeth asked to break the silence.

“You are quite perceptive, my dear.” Lady Catherine pushed herself to her feet. “I have brought you a gift and I cannot wait for you to see it.”

“A gift?” Elizabeth frowned with suspicion.

“Indeed. I felt quite generous.” A smile touched Lady Catherine’s lips, but it did not reach her eyes. “Please accompany me to my room.”

Elizabeth followed the elderly woman.

Emma, Lady Catherine’s maid, left the room as soon as they entered to offer them privacy.

Lady Catherine’s gift was the first thing Elizabeth saw upon entering the room. It was a blue bundle placed in the middle of the bed, severe against the starched white sheets.

“Here it is,” Lady Catherine said.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked, even though every nerve in her body told her she did not want to know.

Lady Catherine gathered the bundle into her arms and brought it to Elizabeth, who had not moved from her spot in the middle of the room. “It’s a blanket. I figured that since plenty of time has passed since you married my nephew, it must be time for an heir.” Lady Catherine stared pointedly at Elizabeth’s stomach. “I *do* hope that is

the case.”

When she placed the bundle of blue in Elizabeth’s hands, Elizabeth felt herself unable to breathe. “I appreciate the gift,” she said, “but I’m afraid it is not needed just yet.”

Lady Catherine’s lips wrinkled even more. “Do you mean to tell me that you are still not with child after all these years?”

Elizabeth pursed her lips before she said something scathing.

“But surely conceiving a child should happen naturally, with no struggle for a woman who is healthy and young.” Lady Catherine inhaled sharply. “I am aware of the fact that you have advanced in age since you married my nephew, but you should still be perfectly capable of conceiving.”

“If I have advanced in years,” Elizabeth said, swallowing her pain, “I can hardly imagine what one must endure to reach your age.”

Lady Catherine inhaled sharply. “Do not misunderstand me, my dear. I am only saying that my nephew deserves an heir and you have not succeeded at providing him with one.” She sighed. “Perhaps he should have married someone who could handle such a task.”

“Someone like your daughter, Anne, you mean?” Elizabeth’s voice was hard.

“You have to admit that my Anne would have been the perfect candidate.” Lady Catherine slid her hand into the crook of Elizabeth’s arm and walked her out of the room. “I am sure you heard that as soon as she married, she conceived in no time.”

“I have certainly heard. You mentioned it in every letter you sent to Mr. Darcy.” Bile formed at the back of Elizabeth’s throat. She was not even sure why she still held on to the gift Lady Catherine had given her for a child that did not exist. “I am pleased for you and her, but Mr. Darcy chose me as his wife. I should hope that the past is the past, and Anne’s love and loyalty solely belong to her husband.”

“And we shall have to make the best of it.” Lady Catherine made it clear that Elizabeth was an inconvenience, and they had no choice but to keep her in the family, even if it pained them.

Thankfully, as soon as they returned to the parlor, after a walk through the Pemberley gallery, Mr. Darcy returned to join them for a cup of tea and biscuits.

As soon as he was seated, Elizabeth described Lady Catherine’s gift to him and watched as a cloud crossed his features. Like her, he knew at once the purpose behind it.

“We appreciate the gift,” he said to Lady Catherine without a smile. “But I would appreciate that no one meddle in our personal affairs.”

Lady Catherine’s face fell and she placed a hand on her chest as though Mr. Darcy had struck her. “Is it wrong of me to wish you well,

my dear nephew? Is it wrong of me to wish you had an heir?"

"An heir would certainly be welcome at Pemberley, but at the right time."

"Unfortunately, time waits for no one. As you know, a woman's days to conceive are numbered." She glared at Elizabeth, her eyes boring into hers. "I shall advise you to make haste before it becomes impossible."

"I must insist that we no longer speak of this matter," Mr. Darcy said in a voice that was sharp enough to make Elizabeth jolt inwardly.

"Very well," Lady Catherine said. "I suppose not everyone can handle well-meant words of advice." She lowered her teacup to the saucer. "I am rather exhausted from my journey. I hope you do not mind if I go and lie down."

"Of course not." Elizabeth was all too pleased to have a reprieve. Lady Catherine had only just arrived and the air had already been sucked from the room. "I shall send someone to notify you when lunch is served."

"That is awfully kind of you, my dear." Lady Catherine forced another one of her cold smiles. "I appreciate you allowing me to stay in my late sister's home."

Elizabeth let out a sigh of relief once Lady Catherine, accompanied by Emma, retired to her room.

"I do not know how I will be able to handle it," she said as soon as she was alone with Mr. Darcy.

"I shall not allow her to stay longer than necessary." Mr. Darcy put his arms around her. "I apologize for her insensitivity, my darling. But remember that I am here to shield you from her words as best I can."

Elizabeth rested her head on her husband's shoulder and closed her eyes, forcing her heart to settle. "I know. Being alone with her would drive me mad," she whispered, then a thought crossed her mind. She lifted her head again. "I would need a distraction. I have an idea if you are open to it."

"What do you propose?" Mr. Darcy asked.

"I would like to have a full house to prevent Lady Catherine from affecting me too much." Elizabeth knew that being surrounded by Lady Catherine's ill will would do nothing to improve her ability to conceive a child. "How about I invite my parents to stay for a few days as well? My mother and Lady Catherine could torment each other while they leave me in peace."

Mr. Darcy laughed out loud. "I could not have come up with a better plan myself. They should come as soon as possible. It is rather short notice, but the servants should be able to prepare their rooms and plan the meals."

"You need not worry yourself about that. They are perfectly

capable and I can assist as well if necessary.” Even though there were enough servants at Pemberley to ensure the smooth running of the household and attend to their every need, sometimes Elizabeth offered a hand. When Mrs. Bennet last visited and found Elizabeth arranging flowers, she had been horrified and scolded her. Undaunted, Elizabeth had told her mother that she hated being idle and there were some chores she would rather do herself. She loved the feeling of being useful.

“As long as you promise me not to overexert yourself,” Mr. Darcy warned. “I know how you can get at times.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You know me too well. I will do only as much as I am able. You have my promise.” She rested her head on Mr. Darcy’s shoulder again. “Thank you,” she said, her voice filled with affection for her husband.

“For what exactly?” Mr. Darcy pulled back to gaze into her face even though he could not see it. He sometimes had such an intensity to his expression that at times Elizabeth felt he could see her after all.

“Thank you for this moment,” she whispered. The only thing she could do was enjoy every day and every moment as it came. “Thank you for being here, for loving me.”

“Thank you as well,” Mr. Darcy said and pressed a kiss to Elizabeth’s forehead. “You should not worry about my aunt. I shall not allow her to hurt you in anyway.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I can stand up for myself, Mr. Darcy, but I do appreciate your offer.” She was well aware that even though she resisted his protection, he would still be there to support her, and she loved him all the more for it.

Chapter 4

Charity, an orphan girl Elizabeth had hired to be a maid at Pemberley, poked her head through the doorway and smiled at her.

"The guests have arrived, Mrs. Darcy," she said in her usual low voice.

"My parents?" Elizabeth's face lit up. As much as she dreaded seeing Mrs. Bennet, she preferred her to Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Upon hearing of the Bennets' visit, her Ladyship had tried to discourage the idea. Mr. Darcy, however, had made it clear who the master of Pemberley was, and that only he and Elizabeth had the power to choose who came and went.

"Thank you, Charity." Elizabeth put down her diary—where she had been jotting down her thoughts—and pushed herself to her feet, following Charity out of the room.

"My dear girl," Mr. Bennet said as soon as he saw Elizabeth coming down the stairs. He opened his arms and she walked straight into them, enjoying the comfort he never failed to offer her.

"Papa, it is such a joy to see you." She pulled back and gazed into his lined face, missing him even though he stood right in front of her.

"It has been too long." Mr. Bennet embraced her again. Then he finally let her go so she could greet Mrs. Bennet as the servants carried off their belongings.

"Good morning, mama." Elizabeth embraced her mother. "I'm glad you could come on such short notice."

"Your invitation to visit was well received," Mrs. Bennet said. "Now that all you children are out of the house, there is nothing much to occupy us there." She broke the embrace and studied Elizabeth from head to toe. Her eyes narrowed with displeasure. "Lizzie Bennet, how often do I have to remind you that being married does not give you permission to neglect your appearance?"

"I do not know what you mean, mama." Elizabeth's chest tightened. Her mother had not been there for long and she was already criticizing her.

"I speak of this." Mrs. Bennet reached out to touch Elizabeth's plain blue, unadorned dress. "Surely, you would agree that this

garment would look right at home on a servant, not the mistress of Pemberley.”

“Mama, it is a perfectly beautiful dress, even if it is not adorned.”

“Mrs. Bennet, leave the girl alone,” Mr. Bennet scolded. “Allow her to dress in whatever way she feels comfortable.”

Mrs. Bennet shot him a look of disapproval. “Mr. Bennet, do not tell me you prefer your daughter to be dressed like a servant.”

He simply smiled at Elizabeth. “If you ask me, I believe Lizzie looks absolutely splendid.”

“Thank you, papa.” Elizabeth smiled back at him.

She was relieved when, at that moment, Mr. Darcy came down from his office to welcome Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Elizabeth’s parents greeted him with warm smiles and affection.

“Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Bennet said, grabbing his hands. “It is always a pleasure to see you. Have I told you that you are my favorite son-in-law?”

“Far more times than I can count.” Mr. Darcy’s face broke into a grin. “But I do not tire of hearing it. Welcome back to Pemberley. We look forward to having you here for a few days.”

It was the first time her parents had come to stay for more than a day or two since Elizabeth had married Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bennet had always felt more comfortable at Longbourn than in someone else’s home. Elizabeth was certainly happy to have them serve as a shield between her and Lady Catherine.

As if summoned by Elizabeth’s thoughts, Lady Catherine returned from her morning walk, before Mr. and Mrs. Bennet could retire to their room to freshen up. She had only met Elizabeth’s parents twice after her marriage to Mr. Darcy, and both occasions had been rather uncomfortable to say the least.

“Lady Catherine, what a pleasure to see you here.” Mrs. Bennet said, kissing her on both cheeks.

Elizabeth blanched as she watched Lady Catherine visibly shrink away from Mrs. Bennet as though she were not worthy of being acknowledged.

“It’s a pleasure,” Lady Catherine said in a curt voice. After she had greeted Mr. Bennet, she turned back to Mrs. Bennet. “How long do you intend on staying?”

“As long as Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy can tolerate our presence in their home.” Mrs. Bennet pushed back her shoulders. “We look forward to spending time with our daughter and son-in-law, as I’m sure you do, too.”

“Certainly,” Lady Catherine responded. “I *do* wish we all had something to celebrate.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

“Mama,” Elizabeth said, interrupting the conversation before it became intolerable. As soon as Lady Catherine had opened her lips, Elizabeth knew she would hint toward her pregnancy, or lack thereof. “You have just arrived. It would be best if you make yourself at home before you find more exciting things to discuss.”

“That is a splendid idea,” Mr. Darcy said, supporting her as he always did. “Mr. Bennet, perhaps afterward you can join me in the study for a glass of port?”

“It would be my pleasure, dear son.” Mr. Bennet’s eyes twinkled. It pleased Elizabeth that, from the start, Mr. Bennet had never looked at Mr. Darcy as though he were a blind man and treated him just like any other.

Mrs. Bennet, on the other hand, had started out behaving rather strangely in Mr. Darcy’s presence, asking him questions that had made Elizabeth want to hide. One such question had been whether he missed seeing flowers in bloom. Thankfully, Mr. Darcy had taken all her questions with good humor and had not been in the least offended. Since becoming Mrs. Bennet’s son-in-law, he had become quite accustomed to her character.

Later, while enjoying tea and cakes, Lady Catherine revived the topic she had introduced when she first greeted Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

“Mrs. Bennet, I’m sure you wish you had another grandchild. We are in need of something to celebrate, do you not think?”

Mrs. Bennet lowered her cup slowly to the saucer and glanced briefly at Elizabeth. “I do indeed,” she said.

“Unfortunately, one cannot predict when such things occur,” Mr. Darcy said, his face tight, his unseeing eyes trained in the direction of Lady Catherine. “When the time is right for a child to be born, it shall happen.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard, wondering whether it had been a mistake to invite her parents after all. She had a feeling that following this conversation, her mother would pester her even more about having a child.

“But you have to agree that it is of paramount importance that you beget an heir immediately.” Lady Catherine continued, ignoring her nephew’s discomfort. “It is a terrible shame that it did not happen soon after the wedding.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes briefly and opened them again, trying to regain her composure. “I believe this is a matter that is better discussed between husband and wife,” she added, finding it hard to swallow her iced cake.

“Do not feel slighted, my dear.” Lady Catherine dabbed her lips with her napkin. “I feel sympathy for you, that is all. I can only imagine what people are saying.”

“This is a matter that does not concern them,” Mr. Darcy said, his voice hard. “And it would be best if we no longer pursue this conversation.”

“As you wish.” Lady Catherine patted her hair, which had not once moved out of place since her arrival. “But Mrs. Bennet, wouldn’t you agree that burying one’s head in the sand can do more harm than good at times?”

“Your Ladyship,” Mrs. Bennet said, her face coloring. “I can assure you that in no time at all, our dear Lizzie will be with child.”

“Mama,” Elizabeth’s own cheeks flooded with heat. “As Mr. Darcy said, one cannot predict such things.”

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat and everyone turned to him. “I, on the other hand, believe that putting unnecessary pressure on Lizzie and Mr. Darcy will do them more harm than good.”

Mr. Bennet was the kind of person who often allowed conversations to proceed without his input, but Elizabeth had noticed that over the past two years he had begun to voice his opinion with more frequency.

“I fully agree with Mr. Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said, touching Elizabeth’s hand. “And I would suggest we let go of this particular topic. There is much more we could discuss on this beautiful day.”

“I fully agree.” Mr. Bennet watched his son-in-law with affection.

Thankfully, the conversation moved on to the weather, politics, music, and travel, but Elizabeth refrained from joining in, choosing to only listen. She still felt shaken by Lady Catherine’s words. She now knew it was a mistake to bring them all together. Even now as they discussed other things, Lady Catherine was making it known that she was far superior to her parents, bringing up subjects that reminded Mr. and Mrs. Bennet that they were of lower birth.

It became so intolerable for Elizabeth that she wished Mr. Darcy were not related to Lady Catherine at all, but then again, her own mother’s character was one that was not pleasing to many. In spite of that, Mr. Darcy had accepted her, and Elizabeth had to do the same for Lady Catherine.

At the end of the long day, Elizabeth had a terrible headache. She dreaded the thought of the days in their presence that still lay ahead. She was all too glad to retire early, followed shortly by Mr. Darcy, whose face looked just as weary as hers.



“THAT WAS AWFUL,” Elizabeth said, sinking onto the bed. “I shall never bring my mother and Lady Catherine into the same room again.”

“I guess we failed to see that such two hard-headed women would be bound to oppose one another. But if they rekindle the topic of an heir again, I shall be forced to ask them to leave.”

“You cannot do such a thing.” Elizabeth rested her head on his chest. “It would be unkind.” She could not even imagine the look on her mother’s face if she were asked to leave Pemberley before she had planned to. She would never stop talking about it.

“Not nearly as unkind as making us feel uncomfortable in our own home.” Mr. Darcy blew out a breath. “I shall not have my wife disrespected.”

“Do not worry. I have come to get used to both my mother and your aunt’s characters.” Elizabeth gazed up at the ceiling. “Perhaps tomorrow will be better and we shall have something to celebrate.”

“We shall celebrate anyway. Even without a child, we have something to celebrate. We have us. Never forget that, my love.” Mr. Darcy kissed the top of Elizabeth’s head, inhaling her sweet scent.

“You are correct. But I hope the next weeks will bring wonderful surprises for us.”

“I’m sure many pleasant surprises lie in store for us. But life is what we make of it.” Mr. Darcy held Elizabeth tighter, smoothing back her hair. “Sleep well, my darling. Dream of me.”

“You too, my love.” When Elizabeth closed her eyes, she thought back to what Lady Catherine had said about people discussing her barrenness behind her back. It was challenging not to be affected by it. She prayed that their circumstances would change sooner rather than later. She wished for a baby so much, not so much for herself, but for Mr. Darcy.

“I love you, Mr. Darcy,” she whispered in the silence of the night, but Mr. Darcy was already fast asleep and not able to hear her. It did not matter. He already knew the depth of her feelings for him.

Chapter 5

During breakfast, Lady Catherine asked to speak to Elizabeth privately after they were done eating. Elizabeth reluctantly agreed and Mr. Darcy offered to go for a stroll with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. They left the table as soon as they had eaten their fill, leaving Elizabeth with a woman whom she despised.

“How are you feeling, my dear?” Lady Catherine asked once they were settled in the sitting room. As usual, her voice held no emotion. The question had nothing to do with her affection for Elizabeth.

“Very well, Your Ladyship.” Elizabeth wondered whether Mr. Darcy had spoken to his aunt and asked her to apologize. She doubted it.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Lady Catherine continued to stare at Elizabeth without speaking. Then her face stretched into what should have been a smile, but resembled a sneer.

“I have been meaning to speak to you,” she said, reminding Elizabeth of several years prior when she had said the same words to her, shortly before warning her to stay away from Mr. Darcy.

“I believe I know what you wish to speak to me about, Your Ladyship.”

“You are a smart young lady,” Lady Catherine said. “The question is, what do you intend to do about the topic about which I am speaking?”

“I do not understand what you expect me to do about the situation. It is not something I have the power over.”

“I disagree.” Lady Catherine’s voice rose. “I am well aware that it takes two people to produce an heir, but I believe there are certain things a lady can do to influence the process.”

Elizabeth frowned. “And what things would those be?”

“I am afraid, it has been many years since I had a child. I suggest you speak to ladies of an age similar to yours. I am certain they would have plenty of advice to share.” Lady Catherine sighed. “I have to say I am quite disappointed. I had come here hoping to be met with pleasant news. You surely understand that I am only looking out for my nephew. He deserves an heir.”

“I agree with you.” Elizabeth said. “But you must understand that this discussion should be between me and Mr. Darcy alone.”

“I understand why you think that, but I believe I have a say in this matter as Mr. Darcy is my nephew.”

Elizabeth gave a silent nod and fixed her gaze on the woman who was somehow making her life even more complicated than it should be. “What would happen if we are blessed with a child, but it is a daughter instead of a son?”

“Then you shall try again as soon as possible.” Lady Catherine paused. “Of course, after an appropriate time of healing has passed. I see no reason why you should wait years to try again.”

Elizabeth stifled the urge to laugh. “I apologize that we are such a disappointment, Your Ladyship, but whether this happens or not is not entirely up to us. I can assure you that Mr. Darcy and I have not been idle, but as I mentioned earlier, this is between Mr. Darcy and I.”

Lady Catherine’s lips drew back in a snarl. “When my nephew informed me he was going ahead with marrying you, I’d hoped that perhaps I had misjudged you, that perhaps you would make a good wife.”

“And you do not find that to be the case?”

“All I can say is that sometimes I have my doubts.”

“Be that as it may, Mr. Darcy chose me because he felt I was the right partner for him. What others think of our union is none of our concern.”

Lady Catherine’s sarcastic smile returned. “I am sure Mr. Darcy would not have married somebody of such low birth if you had not tricked him.”

“Tricked him?” Elizabeth reeled from her words. “In what way would you say?”

“I believe that if you had not feigned illness at the Pemberley ball, he would not have asked you to stay and formed a bond with you.”

The blood drained from Elizabeth’s face and she felt suddenly cold. “You believe I feigned illness to get Mr. Darcy to marry me?” Elizabeth clenched her fists. “I can assure you that was not the case. I had been ill before I arrived at Pemberley that evening.”

“Then you should not have come. He should not have felt the need to care for you during your illness.”

“With all due respect, Your Ladyship, it is time you come to terms with the fact that he chose me without any influence whatsoever. It is unfortunate for you that he had not made the choice you had wanted for him.” Elizabeth was now sure that Lady Catherine was punishing her for Mr. Darcy’s rejection of her daughter.

Lady Catherine waited a few heartbeats before speaking again. When she finally did, her voice sounded worn-out. “I’m afraid, I must

cut our conversation short. I'm coming down with a headache." She pushed back her chair and stood up gracefully, even though Elizabeth could see right through her. There was absolutely no grace to the woman.

Elizabeth had had enough. As soon as Mr. Darcy returned, she intended to tell him everything Lady Catherine had said.

That evening, when they lay in bed, she brought up the subject.

"Would you believe that she accused me of feigning illness so you would fall in love with me?"

"Surely not." Mr. Darcy lifted himself onto his elbows. "Why would she say such a thing?"

"She wants to punish me for marrying you. And as you know, she believes it is my fault that we do not have a child."

"That is not acceptable," Mr. Darcy sat back up in bed, his face a mask of anger.

Elizabeth sat next to him and took a breath. "I need to be honest with you, my darling. The truth is, she disrespected me to the point that I can barely tolerate her in my presence."

"You have every reason to feel that way. I feel awful for leaving you alone with her. I promised to protect you from her." Mr. Darcy pushed himself back to his feet. "I suggest you get some sleep. I shall join you shortly. I will not be at peace unless I speak with my aunt right away."

Before Mr. Darcy reached the door, Elizabeth called him. "It is not my intent to create a wedge between you and your aunt. Please resist the urge to ask her to leave. All I need from her is respect, if not acceptance."

Mr. Darcy walked back into the room, found Elizabeth, and planted a warm kiss on her lips. "You will always remain my priority, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy."

Mr. Darcy's conversation with Lady Catherine lasted quite a while. By the time he returned to the room, Elizabeth had already fallen asleep, but she awoke immediately to ask him what had happened. From the darkened look on his face, she knew the conversation had not gone well.

"My aunt is leaving in the morning," he said, slipping into bed next to her. "She will not disrespect you any longer."

Elizabeth said nothing as she allowed Mr. Darcy to hold her. In the morning, Lady Catherine left before breakfast, without saying goodbye to Elizabeth.

"I apologize that you parted on bad terms," Elizabeth said to Mr. Darcy before they headed down for breakfast.

"I did what had to be done," Mr. Darcy said, getting dressed.

"She did not have to leave Pemberley. I had only wished for her to

extend more kindness toward me.”

“I have known my aunt for a long time. She will never become the woman you wish her to be. What she failed to understand was that by hurting someone I love, she was hurting me in the process. Come to me.” He opened his arms to Elizabeth and she walked into them. “My darling,” he said in a low voice. “I would like you to know that nothing has changed.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, inhaling his scent.

“I know you have been pressured from all sides to produce an heir, but no matter what they say, it is not up to you alone. It will happen at the right time. And for now, I will continue to enjoy your company.”

“That means so much to me, dear husband.” Elizabeth brought her lips closer to his and they kissed.

Breakfast was uneventful in the Pemberley manor. When Mr. Darcy informed Mr. and Mrs. Bennet of Lady Catherine’s departure, they simply nodded and ate their meal in silence. Elizabeth guessed that they were both relieved.

After breakfast, Elizabeth had begun to relax when Mrs. Bennet asked to speak to her, curious to know what had transpired between Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine. Elizabeth did not feel the need to lie to her.

When she was done speaking, Mrs. Bennet sat her down. “I do understand that you are upset about Lady Catherine’s accusations, but I do agree with her on certain matters. You must try harder to produce an heir. If anything, that is the only way for you to put her Ladyship in her place.”

“I shall not be pressured, mama,” Elizabeth said, her voice wary.

“You are still as naïve as ever,” Mrs. Bennet said. “I only speak so as not to allow you to make a mistake. You must stop taking your time.”

“If I could make a miracle happen, I would. Unfortunately, I do not have that power.” Elizabeth hated to repeat herself and the idea that her mother supported Lady Catherine in any way hurt her deeply.

“You do, Lizzie. You are only not trying hard enough because you are naïve to think that your love for Mr. Darcy is enough. Every man yearns for a child of his own. Mr. Darcy is no exception. Sooner or later, your love will not be enough. Bless him with children and your future at Pemberley will be secure. You may not want to hear my advice, but everything I say and do is for your benefit. I am only protecting your future.”

Elizabeth rose to her feet and strode to the window. “Perhaps it is time you allow me to take care of my own future.” She turned back to her mother. “I am a grown woman now, and this is my home and my

life.”

Mrs. Bennet watched her daughter for a long time, her chest rising and falling. “You have no respect for my nerves, Lizzie Bennet. Perhaps it is best for Mr. Bennet and I to also take our leave. We are clearly not wanted here.”

“That is not what I said,” Elizabeth shook her head. “I wish for you to stay, mama. I am not in any way asking you to leave Pemberley.”

“Your disposition and actions say otherwise.” Mrs. Bennet dropped her hands to her sides. “Either way, it is time for us to return to Longbourn. Mr. Bennet is getting restless.”

Elizabeth wished to say more to her mother, to beg her to stay, but she could not find the words.

That evening, her parents drove away in their carriage and Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were alone again to handle their own problems. Elizabeth had been left scarred by the verbal attacks from both Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine, and replayed them over and over inside her head. She only hoped she would not allow her low spirits to affect her moments with Mr. Darcy.

Chapter 6

Three weeks following Lady Catherine and the Bennets's departure, Mr. Darcy awoke in the early hours of the morning and sat up in bed.

He sighed silently when he felt Elizabeth stir next to him. He could not bear the agony of knowing that his wife was in pain so great that it followed her into her dreams. Lady Catherine had certainly left a mark on her heart when she last visited. As a result, Mr. Darcy did not intend to allow her to visit anytime soon, and certainly not without Elizabeth's permission.

Elizabeth had insisted she was fine, but he knew her too well. He knew that she blamed herself for their inability to bring a child into the world.

He longed to comfort her from the pain brought on by what appeared to be a terrible dream, but he did not wish to rouse her from the sleep she so desperately needed. In her waking hours, she never ceased to worry, and when she was asleep nightmares plagued her. For weeks, she had been wrestling with them almost every night. When he inquired what her dreams were about, she merely laughed it off and told him not to concern himself with it.

Plagued with the thought of Elizabeth feeling distressed, Mr. Darcy reached for his stick and pushed aside the covers. He tightened his fingers around the stick and pushed himself to his feet.

In a matter of minutes, he managed to get dressed without waking Elizabeth. It helped that he knew by heart where everything was. The servants always received clear instructions to put everything in its rightful place to enable Mr. Darcy to find his way around and locate any items he needed. Order and tidiness were of utmost importance in the Pemberley household.

Once dressed, he left the room and closed the door quietly behind him.

He only took a few steps down the corridor, when the footfalls of another person reached his ears.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Wilson said.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilson." Mr. Darcy turned around to face

where the voice came from. "Would you be so kind as to let me know the time?"

"Of course, sir. It's only 5 AM." Mr. Wilson paused. "Can I help you with anything this morning?"

Before Elizabeth entered Mr. Darcy's life, Mr. Wilson had been his constant attendant and companion, accompanying him most everywhere he went. Now Elizabeth preferred to be the one by Mr. Darcy's side, always available when he needed her. Although Mr. Darcy no longer needed Mr. Wilson as an attendant, he was unable to relieve him of his duties; the man was not only hardworking, but had proven himself to be loyal and trustworthy. He continued on at Pemberley, taking over the role of footman, and accompanied Mr. Darcy when Elizabeth was otherwise occupied.

"Mr. Wilson," Mr. Darcy said. "Would you mind accompanying me for a short walk on the grounds?"

"I would be glad to, Mr. Darcy." From Mr. Wilson's tone of voice, Mr. Darcy could tell that he was honored to be invited. It had been quite some time since they took a walk together as Mr. Darcy normally walked with Elizabeth.

"I appreciate that." Mr. Darcy took the first step forward.

As the two men made their way down the staircase, Mr. Wilson held to Mr. Darcy's side, just in case his master lost his footing.

Before leaving the house, more servants greeted Mr. Darcy. They were always up at the break of dawn to begin their daily tasks. Mr. Darcy was proud of his staff, and he treated them well for the hard work they did for him and Elizabeth.

Outside, the air was cool against Mr. Darcy's skin, and it smelled crisp, washed by the rain of the previous night. He inhaled the light scent of blossoms and walked slowly, his boots barely making a sound on the damp ground. Next to him, Mr. Wilson was breathing quite loudly. From a distance he could hear the sound of a horse. The only advantage to being struck with blindness was that every other sense came to life more than ever before.

Tapping the ground as they walked, Mr. Darcy enjoyed the silence for a moment, but his heart was so heavy that he needed to confide in someone he could trust. He turned his face toward Mr. Wilson. "Tell me, Mr. Wilson, how do you find Mrs. Darcy these days?"

"I do not know what you mean," Mr. Wilson said, his voice low and deep.

After another moment of silence, Mr. Darcy spoke again. "What I'm trying to find out is whether you perceive her to be happy."

Mr. Wilson cleared his throat. "I cannot say. She seems happy enough to me."

"Mr. Wilson, you have my permission to be honest. I'm sure you

understand why I'm asking you these questions. As you know, I'm unable to see my wife's smile in order to be able to tell from her expression how she feels. I do believe she's not quite happy these days, and it pains me that there's not much I can do."

"Well," Mr. Wilson said. "The truth is, it has been a while since I saw her smile."

As soon as Mr. Wilson answered, Mr. Darcy regretted asking the question. The fact that Elizabeth no longer smiled hurt him greatly. "Thank you, Mr. Wilson," he replied as he could think of nothing more to say.

If Elizabeth was not happy, Mr. Darcy was unsure how he could be happy himself. His blindness had been troubling him quite a lot in the past weeks and it was only in her happiness that he could find his own.

The previous week he had been to London again to see the ocular specialist as he was experiencing unusual sensations in his eyes and persistent headaches which he believed to be related.

However, the thing that drove him there as soon as possible was when he started seeing shadows and occasional brief flashes of light in front of his eyes. At first, he had experienced a glimmer of hope that perhaps he was regaining his eyesight, but not long after, darkness that was even greater than before took over, and doubts set in. The specialist in London was unable to offer him any kind of solace, saying it was quite unlikely that Mr. Darcy would regain his eyesight.

Mr. Darcy had left London feeling so disappointed that he refrained from telling Elizabeth about the new sensations he was experiencing. What was the point in giving her hope where there was none?

After the short walk, Mr. Darcy asked Mr. Wilson to accompany him back to the house. On the way back, he asked him another question.

"What do you think I could do, Mr. Wilson? I would like very much to lift Mrs. Darcy's spirits."

Mr. Wilson thought for a while and then offered, "Perhaps a ball might bring a smile to her face. She once enjoyed hosting them."

"True. And the last one we hosted was close to two years ago," Mr. Darcy said to himself. It has been quite a while since Elizabeth even spoke of hosting any kind of grand event. Mr. Darcy could understand that she did not have the energy to spare after all the pain and disappointments she struggled with daily.

Perhaps if he took over the organization and she was simply required to attend, she might find a way to enjoy herself. "I appreciate your suggestion," he said to Mr. Wilson and they walked back into the house. Mr. Darcy knew what he had to do.

Since lately Elizabeth preferred to sleep into the mid-morning, Mr. Darcy took the opportunity to speak to Mrs. Brooks about the spring ball. She thought it was a fabulous idea and assured Mr. Darcy that she would take over all the organization of the event, including sending out all invitations.

Mr. Darcy was grateful and he agreed with her that the event should take place in three weeks' time. He made it clear to Mrs. Brooks that Elizabeth should not be involved in any of the preparations.

Now that everything was set in motion, Mr. Darcy saw no reason why he should not tell Elizabeth. He could have left it to be a surprise, but he could not contain his excitement.

After breakfast, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth sat in the library, Elizabeth reading aloud to him as she did most mornings, when he decided to bring up the topic.

"My darling, how would you feel about hosting another Pemberley Spring Ball?"

Elizabeth was silent. When at last she spoke, her voice lacked all cheer.

"I do not see why it's necessary."

"I disagree. We have been through a lot and I figured that a celebration would bring a bit of life to the rooms of Pemberley."

Silence fell between them again, but Mr. Darcy could hear her letting out a long breath before responding. "I'm sure you will understand that the last thing I need is to be surrounded by people telling me that I am lacking as a wife and giving me advice on how I should conceive a child." She let go of his hand and rose to her feet. "The ball is not a good idea. Not now. I need a moment alone."

Mr. Darcy rose to his feet as well. When he heard Elizabeth walk toward the door, he hurried after her before she could leave the library. In his hurry, he forgot to bring his stick. Before he could reach the door, it was opened, then closed again.

Another step toward it caused Mr. Darcy to trip over something, a chair perhaps. He caught himself before falling, but he cursed under his breath. He was left standing in the middle of the room, confused about what to do next. Elizabeth needed time alone and maybe it was best not to disturb her. Perhaps she would have a change of heart.

When Mr. Wilson came into the room a few minutes later, Mr. Darcy was still standing and when he heard the footman's voice, he found himself snapping at him.

"Who left this chair standing in the middle of the room?" he barked. "I tripped over it."

"I apologize, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Wilson said. "Are you all right?"

"No, I am not," Mr. Darcy said, his annoyance flaring and coursing

through his veins. "I have always made it clear that everything should be in its place in this household, for obvious reasons."

"Sir, everything *is* in its place. The chair you tripped over is right where it should be. You always found a way around it."

Mr. Darcy said nothing and instead stumbled toward the nearest sofa, using his hands to find his way. With his mind occupied, he no longer had the confidence that he was going in the right direction, especially when it came to his marriage.

He sank into the sofa, tipped his head back, and shut his eyes. Mr. Wilson refrained from saying a word to avoid angering him even more.

Mr. Darcy hated that he was unable to help Elizabeth recover her cheerful demeanor, and it infuriated him that his blindness stood in the way of being a complete man. Sometimes he wondered whether Elizabeth regretted marrying him after all, but that was a thought that he refused to entertain.

Chapter 7

*M*r. Darcy was back in London again, two weeks after he

had left it. His main motivation this time, had been to meet with Mr. Philip Ramsbury, his financial advisor. Unfortunately, the man had terrible news concerning some investments, one in particular, that Mr. Darcy had made a few months prior and now regretted as he stood to lose a large fortune.

After his meeting with Mr. Ramsbury, he paid another visit to Dr. Mead. He hoped for better news this time. His eyes had been disturbing him again and his headaches kept him awake most nights. Now, he was determined to get answers from the specialist.

Mr. Wilson accompanied Mr. Darcy to London. Elizabeth had offered to travel with him, but Mr. Darcy did not want her to, knowing that he planned on seeing the eye specialist. Questions would be sure to follow.

Mr. Wilson waited patiently outside the door during Mr. Darcy's eye examination.

After the examination, the doctor came to sit opposite Mr. Darcy. "Mr. Darcy, I apologize that I must say this again, but I still do not see a change in your eyesight."

"I do not understand why not," Mr. Darcy said, trying but failing to control his temper. "Can you not explain why I see shapes and shadows one day and then nothing for days? I sought you out because you are one of the best eye specialists in London. I was hoping you could give me answers."

Mr. Darcy had made himself believe that perhaps the reason he was seeing shadows and having headaches was because his eyes were going through some kind of change that would lead to him regaining his sight.

Mr. Darcy heard the doctor quietly sigh. "I wish I could tell you what you want to hear, but I would also like to avoid giving you false hope."

"Is it not your job to give hope?" Mr. Darcy shot back.

"My job is to tell the truth." He was able to hear from the doctor's voice that he, too, was getting frustrated.

"I apologize," Mr. Darcy said unfurling his fingers. "I should not have reacted the way I did. You are only doing your job. I had only hoped that this time, you would be able to give me answers."

"Answers I do not have, unfortunately."

Mr. Darcy sat up straight. He searched his mind for the right words to say, but found none.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Mr. Darcy, when you visited two weeks ago, you mentioned that your uncle and grandfather had both been blind shortly before their deaths."

"That's right." Mr. Darcy frowned. "I do not understand why you bring it up."

"I'm starting to question whether your blindness really has anything to do with the altercation you were involved in. There is a chance it may be inherited, and if that is the case, it is highly unlikely that you would regain your sight, especially as you advance in years."

Mr. Darcy closed his unseeing eyes and squeezed them tight until they ached. Then he opened them again. "If that is the case, then why did I lose my sight soon after the fight?"

"Perhaps the blow to the head had triggered something that led to the blindness that was already inevitable." Dr. Mead shifted in his chair. "That is the reason why I'm finding it hard to believe that you are actually seeing shadows or shapes of any kind after seeing nothing for years."

"Are you calling me a liar, doctor? Are you saying that it is all a figment of my imagination?" Mr. Darcy pushed himself up and out of his chair. "Is that what you are implying?"

"I... That is not my point. I am only saying—"

"I believe you have said enough, doctor. It's time I take my leave for now. I can assure you that what has been happening to me is not a figment of my imagination. Goodbye."

Dr. Mead said nothing as Mr. Darcy walked out of the room. As soon as he exited, Mr. Wilson came to his side, close enough for Mr. Darcy to hear him breathing aloud as he always did.

"Did the meeting not go according to your expectations, sir?" Mr. Wilson asked as they left the building.

"No," Mr. Darcy responded. "It did not." Mr. Wilson knew exactly why he was in London. When Mr. Darcy had told him about the shapes he had been seeing, he had also responded with excitement.

"Does the doctor not think there is hope?" he asked.

"He seems to think it is my imagination."

Mr. Wilson was silent and Mr. Darcy was grateful for that. He did not want to discuss the matter further.

"What do we do now?" Mr. Wilson asked finally. "Do we still return to Pemberley tonight?"

Mr. Darcy shook his head. "We should spend another night in London. I have some matters to attend to."

That was not true, as he had already done everything he came to do—participating in two meetings that led to disappointment. However, he was sure that returning home in his current state would only grieve Elizabeth. He needed time to pull himself together, to swallow his disappointment before he faced his wife.

Elizabeth was perceptive. She would know immediately if something was wrong and demand to know what.

Mr. Darcy spent the rest of the day buried in his thoughts, turning Dr. Mead's words over and over in his mind and wondering whether they were true. Was it true that he had inherited his blindness? The thought grieved him so deeply as it would mean there was no going back. It meant the hopes he had held onto for years, that maybe one day a miracle would happen, would be dashed. It devastated him to know he would never see Elizabeth's smile or their future children's joyous faces.

That evening, after Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wilson had had their dinner at the Inn, he went out on his own to roam the streets of London. The rain was pouring, drenching him, but he did not care. Even though it brought on a chill that penetrated through his skin, he did not stop walking.

Mr. Wilson had offered to accompany him, but Mr. Darcy had been determined to be alone, to search for answers he would never find.

At the end of his walk, he returned to the Inn, drenched and still filled with questions. What if he was losing his mind?

And how would he be able to rid himself of the madness? As he closed his eyes to sleep, he wished he had been born blind rather than to have seen the world only to be robbed of his sight.

Chapter 8

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were enjoying a relaxing picnic under a large tree on the Pemberley grounds, with Mr. Darcy determined to spend plenty of time with his wife after so much time spent traveling.

Elizabeth had just started reading to him when Mr. Wilson appeared.

"I apologize for disturbing," he said.

"It's all right, Mr. Wilson." Mr. Darcy tilted his head upward. "Is there anything we can help you with?"

"You look worried." Elizabeth said, closing the book. "Is something the matter?" Mr. Darcy wished he were able to see facial expressions.

"No, not at all. I only came to inform you that you have a guest."

Since Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were quite a distance from the house, they had not seen or heard a carriage arriving.

"Are you expecting a guest, darling?" Elizabeth asked and Mr. Darcy shook his head.

"None that I know of." He rose to his feet, annoyed to have his time with Elizabeth disturbed. "Would you care to tell us who this guest is, Mr. Wilson?"

"It's Lady Catherine, sir," the footman replied and Mr. Darcy stiffened at once. He also heard Elizabeth emit a low gasp. He was familiar with almost every sound she made.

"Is that so?" Mr. Darcy said, unsure what else to say.

"Yes, sir. She's accompanied by another lady, whose name I'm afraid I forgot to ask."

As he stood there, Mr. Darcy wondered who the other guest could be. It did not please him that Lady Catherine made a habit of calling on the Pemberley residence without prior notice. He already feared what her visit would do to Elizabeth. She had only recently started to regain her good humor. Now this.

Mr. Darcy stretched out his hand in the direction of Elizabeth. His lack of sight did not stop him from being a gentleman. Elizabeth grasped his hand and held on tightly as she got to her feet.

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson," she said in a strained voice. "We will join them at the house shortly."

“You must know that my aunt’s visit has nothing to do with me.” Mr. Darcy said to her as they walked back to the house with Mr. Wilson ahead of them.

“I know,” Elizabeth said, taking his hand again. “Lady Catherine is simply doing what Lady Catherine does.”

“But it should not be that way. I shall speak to her. I promise you that.”

“I would be grateful for that. I only hope she does not act in the same manner as her last visit.”

“If she does, I will not hesitate to send her away again.”

“I am reluctant to put you in this position, darling. She is your aunt, after all.”

“She certainly is, but you are my wife, my priority. There are boundaries that should not be crossed.”

“I love you, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said. “Your love gives me the strength to handle anything.”

Mr. Darcy felt better when Elizabeth moved closer to him, and he placed an arm around her waist. He would not allow anyone to add to her existing pain.

When they arrived at the house, Mr. Wilson took them to the parlor where Lady Catherine was drinking tea with her female companion.

As soon as they entered, Mr. Darcy heard the swish of skirts as his aunt got to her feet, then her footsteps as she approached him. He remained by the door, unsmiling even when she kissed him on both cheeks and greeted Elizabeth.

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth,” she said in a voice that lacked warmth.

Even though Elizabeth was married to Mr. Darcy, Lady Catherine had never felt the need to call her Mrs. Darcy, as though she expected the prefix to change.

Trying to hold his temper, Mr. Darcy greeted her in a curt voice. Before he had a chance to say more, Lady Catherine introduced him to Miss Edith Honeyfield.

“Miss Honeyfield is my adopted daughter,” Lady Catherine said. “She was the daughter of good friends of mine who are unfortunately no more. I promised to care for her.”

“How kind of you.” Even though his temples throbbed with rage, Mr. Darcy politely greeted Miss Honeyfield. “Welcome to Pemberley,” he said, and Elizabeth echoed his words.

“Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy,” Miss Honeyfield said, a hint of a smile in her voice. The sound of her voice and fragility of her hand alerted Mr. Darcy that she was quite young.

As Elizabeth offered Miss Honeyfield more tea, Mr. Darcy took the

opportunity to speak to Lady Catherine.

“Might I have a word, dear aunt?”

“Of course,” she said. With her hand on his arm, they left the room and made their way to Mr. Darcy’s study.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Mr. Darcy got straight to the point.

“We did not expect you to visit,” he said, his voice tense. “Elizabeth and I insist that you give us prior notice so that we may prepare for your visits.”

“My dear nephew, I know we parted on unpleasant terms when I last visited Pemberley, and I would not have come were it not for your invitation.” She pulled in a breath. “I have to say I was rather surprised to receive it.”

“An invitation?” Mr. Darcy asked, frowning. “I do not recall sending one.”

Lady Catherine laughed and patted his arm. “Fitzwilliam, of course you sent me an invitation. You invited me to the Pemberley Spring Ball that will take place in three days.”

A rush of horror swept through Mr. Darcy. He had been so occupied with worrying about his eyesight that he had completely forgotten to tell Mrs. Brooks to cancel the event. When Elizabeth had repeated to him that she did not wish to celebrate, he had respected her decision, assuring her that it would not happen.

Unfortunately, he had not mentioned it to Mrs. Brooks, who must have invited his aunt. Mrs. Brooks had in her possession a master list of all the regular guests who were often invited to celebrations that took place at Pemberley. And Lady Catherine’s name was on that list.

“I see,” Mr. Darcy said, his throat tight. As much as he wanted to be furious with Lady Catherine, she was not at fault. He was to blame. “I suggest you make yourself comfortable then.”

“I’m glad we have made peace,” Lady Catherine said.

“Make no mistake that the peace between us will not last for long if my wife is disrespected.”

“I shall be at my best behavior,” Lady Catherine said.

Mr. Darcy found it hard to believe her words, but he was more concerned with how he would tell Elizabeth that the ball would be taking place after all.

While Lady Catherine and Miss Honeyfield settled in, Mr. Darcy took Elizabeth to their bedroom and broke the news to her.

“What do you mean the ball is taking place?” she asked, shocked.

“I forgot to ask Mrs. Brooks to call it off. I fully intended to do it, but it slipped my mind.”

To Mr. Darcy’s surprise, Elizabeth drew nearer to him on the bed and took his hand. “Don’t blame yourself. You meant well.” She kissed

him on the cheek. "I apologize for the way I reacted when you first shared your plans with me. You only wished to please me. For that I am truly grateful. The ball shall proceed."

Mr. Darcy, himself, no longer felt like celebrating, especially since money was now tight. However, he was relieved that Elizabeth was not upset, and he vowed to do everything in his power to make it up to her.

At dinner with his aunt and Miss Honeyfield, he was anxious throughout, expecting Lady Catherine to again say something that would upset Elizabeth. But to his surprise, she held her tongue and instead focused on conversing with Mr. Darcy and Miss Honeyfield. Of course, Mr. Darcy felt anger that his wife was not included in the conversation, but he knew Elizabeth probably preferred it that way.

But there was something else that troubled him. He could not shake the feeling that there was a deeper reason why his aunt had come, a reason he would not be pleased with.

He certainly looked forward to Lady Catherine's departure as soon as the ball came to an end.

Chapter 9

When the day of the spring ball arrived, Elizabeth was prepared to make the most of it. It had been Mr. Darcy's intention to lift her spirits and she would make an effort to enjoy herself.

She knew that she had been distant for months as she struggled to cope with the pain of not conceiving, but she would stop blaming herself for it. It was not her fault, and it was not his fault either. It was simply a twist of fate.

Charity stepped away from her after wrapping her hair into an intricate hairdo. "How do you like it, Mrs. Darcy?" she asked with a smile.

"I love it, Charity. Your handiwork is amazing."

Elizabeth smiled at herself in the mirror. Even after three years of marriage, being referred to as Mrs. Darcy brought a pleasant sensation to her heart. She still considered herself lucky.

She had hoped for children to enrich their union, but she had never stopped loving Mr. Darcy. Throughout their struggles she would do her best not to push him away because when all was said and done, she was blessed to be married to the man who had stolen her heart.

"I'm pleased you like it. You look lovely."

Elizabeth thanked and dismissed the maid, dressing on her own before joining Mr. Darcy to receive guests downstairs.

Most of the Bennet family would also be present at the ball and this time, instead of dreading their visit, Elizabeth forced herself to be glad. She was especially excited to see Kitty, whom she had not seen for the longest time as her sister had found a passion for travel.

Minutes later, Elizabeth admired her new gown in the mirror. It was pale yellow with beads and crystals surrounding the waist and hem. A gown fit for the mistress of Pemberley.

It had been a while since she dressed in something extravagant. The gown she wore had been a gift from Mr. Darcy, who had purchased it in London not long after she miscarried their baby. Although she had tried it on to see if it fit, she had never worn it to any event. Even though it had not been his intention, every time she

laid eyes on the gown, she was reminded of the child they had lost.

But tonight, as she observed it in the mirror, she only saw a beautiful gown and nothing more.

“Are you ready, my darling?”

Elizabeth turned to see Mr. Darcy standing in the doorway, looking dashing in his coat and tails. She usually heard his stick tapping the floor whenever he moved around the manor, but not today.

She closed the distance between them and wrapped her arms around him. “I am wearing the gown you bought for me last year in London.”

Mr. Darcy closed the door behind them. “I am pleased to hear that. Tell me how it looks on you.”

Since Elizabeth was Mr. Darcy’s eyes, she did as she was told. “It’s beautiful. And it fits the earrings I am wearing, which are also yellow in color. As for how it feels to the touch, you already know.”

“I certainly do.” Mr. Darcy chuckled and ran his hands up and down her sides, studying her with his hands. “You are right. It fits like a second skin. You feel fabulous.”

“Thank you, my darling husband.”

“Are you ready to join the guests downstairs?” he asked. “Your family has arrived.”

“Who is present?” Elizabeth asked, dreading the response.

“Your parents, Kitty, Jane and Mr. Bingley, and Mary.”

Elizabeth tried not to be upset that Lydia had not come. They had a strained relationship, especially since Mr. Wickham forbade her from visiting Pemberley. She missed her sister so dearly and wished for the day when Mr. Wickham did not stand in her way.

“Shall we?” She slipped her hand through the crook of Mr. Darcy’s elbow. “I look forward to seeing them all.”

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy descended the stairs as the guests below gazed up at them, entranced by Elizabeth’s beauty.

Standing at Mr. Darcy’s side, Elizabeth welcomed their guests warmly. Not long afterward, the musicians started to play, and soon the dancing commenced.

Mr. Darcy was right, Elizabeth thought as she allowed music and laughter to wash over her. A ball had been the perfect way to breathe life into the barren halls of Pemberley.

She danced with Mr. Darcy, guiding him patiently on the dance floor. She also danced with her father, then she stood back to observe the people around her.

Mr. Bennet, who had never been fond of balls or dances, looked uncomfortable; it was rather comic. He went on about how his suit was too tight on him even though Mrs. Bennet assured him it was the right fit.

"You look wonderful, papa," Elizabeth whispered into his ear. "I'm glad you could attend."

Mrs. Bennet gave a deep sigh. Elizabeth was only able to hear it because the music had stopped for a moment.

"What is wrong, mama?" she asked.

"I do miss the days when my job was to pair all of you with a suitor. It used to make these events all the more exciting for me."

"You still have a daughter without a husband, mama." Elizabeth glanced at Kitty, who was busy turning down any offers to dance.

"I have given up hope on Kitty choosing a husband. She is much too wild now that she has taken an interest in traveling. What is wrong with England? She has everything she needs here. But instead, she keeps gallivanting around the world, running from her responsibilities."

Elizabeth stifled a grin as she took in her mother's pinched expression. "Mama, Kitty's happiness is the only thing she is responsible for, and that is what she is chasing."

Without warning, a sharp pain stabbed Elizabeth's heart as though she, too, ached to experience the things Kitty enjoyed. She was happily married and she would not have wanted it any other way, but she craved the excitement of experiencing something new. The constant pressure to have a baby was stifling her joy.

"I do not understand why Kitty has to be different," Mrs. Bennet continued. "Why can she not be normal like all of my other daughters?"

"We are all different people, mama. We have different desires, and if Kitty is not ready to marry, that is her decision. I would prefer that she find somebody who she loves enough to spend the rest of her life with." Elizabeth would rather Kitty traveled than marry a miserable man like Mr. Wickham, as Lydia had.

She gazed at her father for support, but he was too occupied with pulling at his suit, his face folded by discomfort.

"Papa, would you care for another dance?"

"I would be honored." Mr. Bennet's face lit up and he extended his hand to Elizabeth. As the band started to play again, Mr. Bennet swept his daughter across the dance floor.

"Thank you for coming," Elizabeth said.

"I am glad to be here and to see you smiling again."

Elizabeth's smile widened. "It is good to remember what happiness feels like."

"My darling girl," Mr. Bennet said, tightening his fingers around Elizabeth's, "The rain does not last forever. Soon the sun will break through the sky."

"I hope you're right, papa."

After dancing with Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth pulled Kitty to the drawing room, where they could converse undisturbed.

“How have you been, dear Kitty?” she asked, holding her sister’s hands. “You look happy.”

“I am happy, Lizzie. There is nothing I would rather do than travel.”

“I’m glad you’re doing what you love.”

“For the longest time I had thought I was meant to marry like everyone else, but now I know that is not what I want for myself.”

Elizabeth smiled, but she felt an emptiness in the pit of her stomach as she remembered the days when she used to be as independent as Kitty.

“I wish you could have your wishes come true as well,” Kitty said, and Elizabeth could not help noticing how mature her sister sounded. Traveling had certainly been good for her.

“My only wish is to give Mr. Darcy a gift that no one else can, the gift of being a father.”

“But I believe Mr. Darcy will love you no matter what. Whether you give him an heir or not, that will never change. His expression is always filled with love when he speaks of you.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said in a low voice. “I can never allow myself to forget how lucky I am to be his wife.” She wondered whether ten years from now Mr. Darcy would feel the same way if they still did not have children. Would she still be enough for him? Would their love survive the test of time?

Chapter 10

*M*r. Darcy was enjoying every moment of the celebration. In

the past, he had not taken well to dancing and preferred to keep a distance from everyone, but with Elizabeth in his arms, the activity felt like the most natural thing in the world.

She threw back her head, laughter spilling from her lips as he turned her around on the dance floor. The sound of her laughter, whose pleasantness far rivaled the music the band was playing, was enough to drown the worries in his head, for the moment at least. It had been a while since he heard her undiluted laughter, and he would hold on to it for as long as possible. That sound would keep him going in his moments of despair.

When the music ceased, Elizabeth guided him from the dance floor, then excused herself to speak to her parents and Kitty.

The moment Mr. Darcy was alone, he heard Lady Catherine speak to him.

“My dear nephew, you look rather happy.” Mr. Darcy did not miss the sarcasm in her voice.

“I am indeed happy,” he said, folding his hands in front of him. “I hope you are enjoying yourself.”

“Indeed. It was a splendid idea to host a ball. I am glad to have been invited.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” It pleased Mr. Darcy to know that in the days Lady Catherine spent at Pemberley prior to the ball, she had not yet said or done anything to upset Elizabeth. Granted, she hardly conversed with her, but both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy preferred it that way given the experiences of her previous visit.

“There is only one minor thing that is preventing me from fully enjoying myself this evening,” Lady Catherine said.

“And what would that be?” Mr. Darcy felt his chest tighten.

“It pertains to Miss Honeyfield.” She sighed. “The girl seems quite lonely with no one asking her to dance. I was hoping you would do me the favor of stepping in and making her feel more at home.”

Mr. Darcy could not help a smile forming on his face. “Dear Aunt, it is kind of you to care about your guest’s happiness tonight, but I am

afraid I already have a dancing partner for life. I am certain you will have no trouble finding a suitable dancing partner for Miss Honeyfield, one who is otherwise unattached. If you would excuse me? It is time I ask my wife for another dance.”

Lady Catherine said nothing as Mr. Darcy walked away from her. It was quite a challenge for him to know where he was going especially in a room filled with ball goers, but fortunately Mr. Wilson appeared at his side and asked if he needed assistance.

“Yes, if you please. I am on the search for Mrs. Darcy.”

“Then I shall find her and bring her to you,” Mr. Wilson said good-naturedly. It seemed the event had positively affected even the servants’ spirits.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilson.”

Mr. Darcy remained where Mr. Wilson had left him until he returned with Elizabeth in tow. He asked her for another dance and she obliged.

They joined the other dancers once more and Mr. Darcy allowed Elizabeth to lead as she was able to tell the distance between them and their fellow dancers.

After the dance, he felt his second headache of the day coming on and he excused himself from Elizabeth to find a quiet place to take a break. Perhaps he had overexerted himself.

“You have worn me out with dancing, my dear wife. Perhaps old age is catching up with me.” He laughed. “I shall find a place to sit and catch my breath.”

“Shall I join you?” She placed a hand on his arm.

“That is not necessary. Enjoy the time with your family. Mr. Wilson will escort me to one of the rooms.”

“All right then. I will see you in a moment.”

Mr. Wilson escorted Mr. Darcy to his study, where he sank down into a chair.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilson.” Mr. Darcy exhaled. “I shall be fine alone for now.”

“Very well, sir.” Mr. Wilson shifted his feet. “Should you need anything else, you need only to ring the bell.”

Left alone, Mr. Darcy dropped his head into his hands. It felt heavy and on the verge of exploding, the pain concentrated around the area of his eyes.

As he wrestled with the pain, he heard the sound of the door opening.

“Who’s there?” he asked, lifting his head.

“It is I. I did not mean to startle you,” Lady Catherine answered. Mr. Darcy listened to her footsteps making their way across the room toward the place where he sat. “I was hoping we could have a word.”

“Nothing urgent, I hope,” Mr. Darcy said. “I was hoping to be alone for a while.”

“I apologize for the intrusion, but yes, it pertains to an important matter.”

Mr. Darcy heard the swish of skirts as Lady Catherine likely took a seat. He was suddenly curious to know what she wanted to say to him, although he feared it might not be something he wanted to hear.

“I suppose I can spare some minutes. What is this matter you speak of?”

“I have to say I am rather disappointed at your refusal to dance with Miss Honeyfield. As a guest in your household, is it not your responsibility to make her feel welcome?”

Mr. Darcy shook his head, trying to push his agony to the back of his mind. “I do not understand what you mean.”

“I had asked you to dance with her, but you chose to dance with Elizabeth instead.”

“I fail to see why that is a problem. Elizabeth is my wife.”

“A wife who is incapable of bearing you children. Perhaps you should select another. Someone as kind and respectable as Miss Honeyfield would enrich your life, would you not say?”

Mr. Darcy clenched his fists. “Is that why you disturbed me?” His voice was low and steely. “Please do not tell me that your mission to visit Pemberley was to ask me to dispose of Elizabeth and marry another.”

“To me it appears to be the best solution in this case.”

“You cannot be serious.” Mr. Darcy shot to his feet. “Surely, you do not expect me to exchange my wife for another. What right have you to meddle in my affairs?”

“Darling nephew, there is no need for dramatics. Please sit.”

“I prefer to stand,” Mr. Darcy said between clenched teeth.

“Very well, but please hear what I have to say.” Lady Catherine cleared her throat. “Would you not like an heir for Pemberley?” Her voice was calm and threatening all at once. “Miss Honeyfield can bear children, something your current wife obviously cannot do.”

“With or without children, I love my wife. She is the one I chose.” Mr. Darcy’s face burned with rage. “I am a married man and I would ask that you respect my marriage.”

“How could I possibly? You made a grave mistake not marrying my Anne. She is happily married now with children she did not struggle to conceive. If you had chosen her, you would be a father by now and Pemberley would have an heir.”

Mr. Darcy shut his eyes. He could not bear the thought that his aunt was capable of such cruelty. It was despicable for her to expect him to hurt his wife in this way. Perhaps it was time for him to make

it clear once and for all that she had no right to dictate his life.

"Enough," he said slowly, his voice deeper than ever. "You must leave immediately. I shall not have my wife disrespected in her own home." Mr. Darcy pointed a finger in the direction he thought the door should be, his hand trembling. Then out of nowhere, he heard Elizabeth's voice and terror swept through him. How much of the conversation did she hear?

"Darling," she said. "Is everything all right?" she asked, her voice pregnant with questions he did not wish to answer.

"No," he said honestly. "Everything is not all right." There was no reason for him to disguise the truth at this point. "I have just asked my aunt to leave Pemberley."

"Are you completely sure about that, Fitzwilliam?" Lady Catherine asked, a thread of warning in her tone.

"I meant every word I said. And perhaps it is best you do not return."

"Is that so? And if you push me out, who would rescue you from your financial situation? I'm the only one with funds to do so."

"How do you—"

"A trusted friend of mine keeps me updated on your situation. I did not wish to meddle in your affairs, but I care about you. I would not want you to meet with financial woes that are impossible to overcome. I am aware that your latest failed investments have lost you a fortune."

While Mr. Darcy reeled from what his aunt had just said, Elizabeth spoke again. "Darling, what—"

"Miss Bennet," Lady Catherine said, ignoring the fact that Elizabeth was no longer referred to by her maiden name, "If you love my nephew, you will let him be. He deserves an heir and you are unable to offer him that."

"Leave this house at once." Mr. Darcy's voice boomed through the room, echoing off the walls.

"If that is your wish. I shall be on my way, but be sure to give my offer some thought."

Mr. Darcy listened as Lady Catherine made her way to the door. He waited until she closed it, leaving him alone with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth immediately came to his side and touched his shoulder gently. "What was that conversation about?" she asked, her voice loaded with pain.

"My darling, I have terrible news," he said. "There is something I have been keeping from you."

Chapter 11

Elizabeth sat and listened quietly as Mr. Darcy explained their financial circumstances, but her mind was more troubled by what she had heard transpire between him and Lady Catherine, whose words still rang in her ears.

She had not listened to their entire conversation, but she heard enough to give her pause. To know that Lady Catherine had brought Miss Honeyfield to Pemberley in an attempt to take her place made her almost physically ill. She should have known just how powerful Lady Catherine's influence was in Mr. Darcy's life.

"How bad are the finances?" she asked, pushing the topic aside to confront later.

Mr. Darcy sank into a chair, his features contorted with worry. "Worse than I had anticipated. I placed large amounts of money in an investment that had promised large returns. I had done so due to the fact that we were already experiencing financial troubles. I thought that the opportunity came at the right time. I should have been more cautious." He wiped his brow. "Part of my frequent travels to London had been to try and salvage the situation during endless talks with my financial advisor, but unfortunately, there is nothing that can be done. The money is gone."

Elizabeth crossed her legs at her ankles and leaned back in her chair. "I am your wife. Why did you not share these developments with me?"

From what Elizabeth was hearing, it appeared that Mr. Darcy had known about the failed investment for quite some time and had kept it to himself. She had thought that they held no secrets from each other. Most of all it pained her to know that he suffered in silence without her knowledge. It should have been her role to help him carry his burdens.

"I did not wish to trouble you," he said.

"I am stronger than you think," Elizabeth said sternly. "Surely, you are aware of that."

Mr. Darcy reached for her hand. "I am well aware. But other struggles occupied your mind."

“My inability to bear children?” Elizabeth could not keep a bitter smile from crossing her lips. When Mr. Darcy did not respond, she continued, her head bowed. “Are you considering Lady Catherine’s offer?”

She hated that with only a few words, Lady Catherine had managed to ruin her evening and also planted in her the fear that she might lose her husband. What if, after giving her offer some thought, Mr. Darcy came to the conclusion that she was not worth the sacrifice, and instead chose to allow Lady Catherine to rescue him financially.

“Certainly not.” Mr. Darcy’s voice was as firm as his hand around hers. “I would not exchange you for anything in the world. You are my wife. We vowed to spend the rest of our lives together. I believed in our union from the start. Surely, you know that?”

“But you also believed I was capable of bearing children.” Elizabeth blinked back tears. “As Lady Catherine has emphasized repeatedly, I have failed you as a wife.”

Mr. Darcy pulled her into his arms and held on tight. “You can never fail me, Elizabeth Darcy. It does not matter what you do or do not do. I am fortunate to have the permission to spend my life with you.”

“Are you prepared to risk everything for our love?” Elizabeth was certain that Lady Catherine would not rest until she had torn their marriage to shreds, and it terrified her to the core. What if their financial situation worsened and Mr. Darcy found himself in a place where he had no choice but to turn to her for help?

“Your love is what keeps me sane.” Mr. Darcy kissed her. “Knowing that I hold you in my heart is what gets me through the day.”

Elizabeth pulled back, her hands cupping his face. “What if you lose Pemberley? Would you be able to live without it? Would you be able to live each day knowing you had a chance to save it, but didn’t? Would I not be a constant reminder of what you lost?”

Mr. Darcy said not a word and Elizabeth felt her heart squeeze with pain. “In that case, perhaps you should consider Lady Catherine’s offer.” She gently moved away from him and got to her feet. “I wish to end the evening early. I shall sleep in one of the guest quarters. We should continue this conversation in the morning.”

Mr. Darcy still said nothing as Elizabeth walked out of the study and headed to a guest room furthest from where the celebrations were being held. In the corridor, she came across Charity, who asked if she needed help preparing for bed. She shook her head.

“No, Charity. You may take the evening off if you wish.” Elizabeth was desperate to be left alone. She did not wish to speak to anyone or return to dancing, pretending that she had not a care in the world. She

was certainly not prepared to tell her family about everything that had happened yet.

She closed the door behind her and stood against it, pressing her back against the wood, her eyes closed, her heart aching.

She had had so much hope for herself and Mr. Darcy and now their life was being chipped away piece by piece. She had known Lady Catherine would be a nuisance, but she had never predicted that she would so relentlessly try to break up their marriage.

Elizabeth had believed that once Mr. Darcy exchanged vows with her, Lady Catherine would have no choice but to respect that. How wrong she was.

She moved across the room as though she were wading through water and made her way to the bed in the darkness. The darkness felt comforting somehow as it wrapped its thick cloak around her.

Still fully clothed in her beautiful gown, she lay back on the covers and gazed up at the ceiling. Her future was as dark as the night.

Before she could fall asleep, she was startled by a soft knock on the door. She thought perhaps it was Mr. Darcy, but then she heard Jane's voice.

"Lizzie, can I come in?"

The door opened before Elizabeth could respond.

Jane was accompanied by Charity, who immediately lit a lamp.

Elizabeth did not move from the bed, but continued to stare at the ceiling.

"Are you all right?" Jane came to sit next to her on the bed while Charity walked out, closing the door behind her. "Mr. Darcy mentioned that you are feeling unwell."

"Did he mention why?"

"No, he did not seem to want to discuss it. In fact, he seemed unwell himself. Did something happen, Lizzie?"

"Something certainly happened." Elizabeth placed a hand on her forehead. "And it had everything to do with his aunt."

"Lady Catherine?" Jane asked. "Was that the reason she was leaving the ball so early? Did Mr. Darcy send her away for some reason?"

"He did." Elizabeth turned to face her sister. The tears that had collected in her eyes slid down her cheek. "She had come to Pemberley to convince Mr. Darcy to end his marriage to me in order to marry a woman who can bear him children."

Jane's hand flew to her chest. "Surely, you're not serious."

"Unfortunately, it's the truth. She did not make a secret of the fact that she wished me out of Mr. Darcy's life. She clearly told me that if I love him, I would set him free."

"That's awful. I am so sorry, Lizzie. You do not deserve to be hurt

that way. But since Mr. Darcy has sent her away, am I correct in thinking he rejected her wish?"

"I wish it were as simple as that," Elizabeth said, placing her hands over her eyes. "I also learned that Mr. Darcy made some financial investments that came to nothing, and he has lost a massive fortune. He revealed it to me only tonight."

"Goodness." Jane's eyes widened. "I am so sorry to hear that. No wonder you're upset. That is all too much for someone to handle in one night."

"My heart is heavy, Jane. Especially since Lady Catherine is prepared to rescue him, but only if he would leave me."

"What a cruel woman. Oh, Lizzie, I cannot even begin to imagine how you feel." Jane gathered Elizabeth into her arms. "But Mr. Darcy loves you. I do not believe he would give you up for anything."

"I want to believe that so much," Elizabeth said. "But what good am I to him when I am unable to give him something he so desperately needs? I cannot rescue him from his financial troubles and I cannot offer him an heir. What good am I to him?"

"Do not speak like that, Lizzie. You are everything to him, and he is lucky to have you for a wife."

When Jane let her go, Elizabeth found herself smiling through her tears. "I will try to believe it. But for now, I need to sleep to escape from all I heard tonight."

"I understand. Mama is asking questions about your whereabouts. I shall do my best to keep her out of your way."

"Thank you, Jane. That would be for the best."

Before Jane left the room, she turned to Elizabeth. "You and Mr. Darcy are a perfect pair. You will both make it through these trials. I just know it."

Elizabeth simply smiled.

Chapter 12

*M*r. Darcy turned to his side in the large bed, facing the side

where Elizabeth normally slept. He stretched out his hand to touch the place where she usually lay. It was cool to the touch, devoid of her warmth.

It was not long since he saw her and yet he missed her desperately. It tormented him to remember how hurt she sounded when she spoke of Lady Catherine's offer to him. The sound of her broken voice had tortured him.

He felt as though he were somehow to blame.

For Elizabeth to choose to sleep in the guest quarters, something she had never done before, told him that a line had been crossed and it would be a challenge to return to the way things were before.

He had been wrestling with sleep for hours, but it refused to embrace him. He wished so much to forget what had happened earlier that night, but he failed to harness the thoughts that raced through his mind. It was pushing him to the brink of madness.

He eventually gave up trying to sleep and sat up. For a while, he sat there, in his own personal darkness, his hands on either side of him. Then he rose to his feet and found his way to his office.

As soon as he entered, he realized it was a mistake as thoughts of his conversation with Lady Catherine flooded his mind even more and he found himself thinking about her offer, which triggered him to think more deeply about his marriage to Elizabeth and the life they led together, a life they had hoped to be more pleasant than it currently was.

Weighed down by his grief, he shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. When he opened them again, a flash of pain struck him in the eyes, causing him to curse out loud. He waited patiently for the pain to disappear, ignoring the message it might be sending him. There was no point in connecting it to the recovery of his eyesight. He had accepted his fate, that he would continue to live in darkness for the rest of his life.

Mr. Darcy was still deep in thought when he heard a commotion at the door.

“My dear friend,” Mr. Bingley said. “I saw you wandering the halls and decided to come and speak to you. I hope you do not mind me disturbing you. I was in the library as I’m unable to sleep.”

“Neither could I,” Mr. Darcy said, straightening up. “I often come in here when sleep fails me. I find the smell of old books rather soothing. Please take a seat so we can wear ourselves out with conversation.”

Mr. Darcy heard a squeaking sound as Mr. Bingley found a seat.

“Darcy,” Mr. Bingley said cautiously, “I do not mean to intrude, but I spoke to Jane earlier this evening. She had a talk with Elizabeth and apparently, the two of you are going through some struggles. As your longtime friend, may I ask what the matter is? I would like to support you in any way I can.”

Mr. Darcy massaged his temples, considering if he should confide in Mr. Bingley. He decided there was no harm in sharing his burdens with a dear friend. Perhaps it would provide him with some relief. “I do not know where to begin. So much has been happening as of late.”

“All is not well then?”

“Far from it. The truth is, my health, my marriage, and my finances are in turmoil. I have lost a fortune due to a failed investment and my lack of sight has been increasingly bothersome every day.” Mr. Darcy let out a bitter chuckle. “Elizabeth is the light of my life, but she does not deserve a blind husband with no money. I have absolutely nothing to offer her.”

“My dear friend,” Mr. Bingley said, his voice low and tortured. “How long have you been carrying such a burden on your own?”

“For quite some time, several weeks perhaps.”

“And how bad is your financial situation exactly?” Mr. Bingley asked.

“I have Pemberley and a dwindling fortune. I have lost a significant amount of money, but I hope my financial advisor will be able to sort things out before they worsen.” Mr. Darcy gripped the chair’s armrest. “I feel like I’m losing my mind. And my blindness is giving me grief.”

“But Darcy, you have been blind for quite some time. I had come to think you had accepted it. You seemed to be managing quite well.”

“I had fooled everyone, including myself at times. To be perfectly honest, I’ve lived each moment hoping I would see again eventually. It gave me the strength to get through each day.” Mr. Darcy proceeded to tell Mr. Bingley about the strange sensations in his eyes and the shadows, flashes of light, and headaches he had been experiencing.

“I am surprised to hear all this.” Mr. Bingley tapped the armrest of his chair. “How long has it been going on?”

“It started some weeks ago, and it had given me hope that perhaps

something was changing. But after seeing a specialist in London on several occasions, I was reminded that both my maternal grandfather and an uncle had been blind at the times of their deaths. The eye specialist seems to believe I inherited their blindness.”

“You mean to say it might not have been brought on by your altercation with Mr. Wickham?”

“That is what the specialist suspects. If that is the case, there is no hope for me. And if there is no chance of me seeing again, what good am I to Elizabeth?”

Mr. Bingley patted Mr. Darcy’s shoulder. “It would be wrong of you to question your union. Knowing you are blind did not stop Elizabeth from marrying you. She willingly chose a life with you.”

“She did indeed choose a life with me, but I do not believe she knew exactly what that would truly entail. How long until she decides that it’s not the kind of life for her, after all? It would have been so much simpler to have money and be blind than to be blind and have no money. I am starting to think that Elizabeth deserves a better life than I am able to offer her.”

“Surely, you’re not considering letting her go.” Mr. Bingley said, shocked.

“I am only saying that perhaps I should give her a chance to be happy with someone else.” If Mr. Darcy had not married Elizabeth, perhaps she could have married a man who would be able to see her smile and her eyes. She deserved to have her beauty admired each and every day by the man she loved.

He had thought of what Lady Catherine had said, that she would only offer him her assistance if he chose someone else to replace Elizabeth. He would never exchange Elizabeth for money under any circumstances, but what if keeping her with him was making her unhappy? What if the fact that they were not able to bear a child was a sign that they were not meant to be together, after all?

Even if he were to set Elizabeth free, he did not feel he would be in the position to marry another woman. He would never feel for another what he felt for Elizabeth. But he wanted her to be happy and what he was in the position to give her was less than the best. He hated to imagine his wife with someone else, but could he really deny her the life she deserved? Perhaps he should be grateful for the time she had already given him.

“Darcy, as your trusted friend, I feel I have the right to warn you that by letting Elizabeth go, you would be making a grave mistake. There would never be another woman like her for you. You are a perfect match, like Jane and I.”

“What more can I offer her?” Mr. Darcy’s voice was hard. “Perhaps it is my fate to spend the rest of my life alone and impoverished.” Of

course, he would never be truly poor. He would do everything to keep Pemberley. And even if he ended up losing his entire fortune, he would still have enough left to allow him to live a modest lifestyle.

“It will never come to that. Your finances will straighten out soon enough and I shall help where I can.”

“I thank you, my dear friend, but I refuse to be indebted to you or anyone else.” He paused. “Even if my financial situation improves, without Elizabeth in my life. I would remain a poor man.”

“Then do not make the mistake of letting her go. I advise you to give no more thought to the idea than you already have.”

“But she is unhappy, Bingley. I may be holding her back from experiencing life at its best.”

“And I believe that Elizabeth would choose this life even if she knew this is where you would end up. She loves you that much. From the way she looks at you, it is impossible to miss.”

“And I love her enough to give her the option of walking away should she choose to do so.”

Chapter 13

In the morning, Elizabeth asked Charity to bring her breakfast to the room. She did not want to face her mother, who would have questions she was not prepared to answer.

But when Charity returned to the room with her breakfast, Mrs. Bennet was with her. Elizabeth's heart was heavy when she thanked Charity and dismissed her to be left alone with her mother.

"Elizabeth Darcy, tell me it's not true that you and Mr. Darcy are having marital problems. What have you done?"

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief. "Mama, why do you assume it is I who am at fault?"

"Well, you *are* the one sleeping in a guest chamber. You left your husband to spend the night alone."

Elizabeth pulled herself up to a sitting position. Her eyes were swollen and painful from all the crying she had done the night before. She did not even recall actively crying, but perhaps she had wept in her sleep.

She considered not telling her mother what Lady Catherine had said, but she knew Mrs. Bennet would only continue to pester her. She would say it all at once and be done with it.

"Lady Catherine suggested that Mr. Darcy should leave me and marry a lady who is able to bear him children."

Mrs. Bennet's eyes widened and she sank onto the bed next to Elizabeth. "That woman continues to amaze me. Why would she say such a thing? That is just plain cruel."

"She is capable of so much more. You will be shocked to know that she brought to the ball the woman she hopes would replace me as the mistress of Pemberley."

"Are you speaking of Miss Honeyfield. She never left lady Catherine's side."

"That is she," Elizabeth said, reaching for a piece of fruit on the plate.

"Then, Lizzie, in that case you should hurry to get Mr. Darcy an heir. You cannot lose your husband to someone else, especially one as rich as Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth gazed at her mother and shook her head. "I do not understand what you wish me to do."

"You do," Mrs. Bennet said in a sharp voice. "You will try harder to produce an heir for Mr. Darcy. You must stop dawdling. You cannot lose him to a woman of Lady Catherine's choosing."

"You know as much as I do that it's not as simple as that. If I had the power to conceive a child immediately, I would. But I am unable to do that." I pause. "Mr. Darcy and I will be happy with or without a child."

"Do not be so naïve as to think that you're enough for Mr. Darcy, that your deep love for one another is all he needs. Every man deserves a child, believe me when I say that. Sooner or later, your love will not be sufficient for his happiness. As long as you do not have his child, your marriage will remain vulnerable to other women."

Elizabeth had heard enough. The longer she listened to what her mother had to say, the worse she felt about the whole situation. "I'm tired, mama. Could we discuss this later?"

"That is exactly the problem, Lizzie. You prefer to work through things alone. You should be open to assistance."

"Mama, I do understand that you would like to help. I also understand that you mean well, but only Mr. Darcy and I can truly solve this issue."

"I understand." Mrs. Bennet placed a hand on Elizabeth's. "I shall go to breakfast now, but I suggest you speak to your husband. Do not make your marriage even more vulnerable than it already is." She stood up and left the room, leaving Elizabeth to ponder the words she had said.

Her mother was right. Her marriage was threatened now more than ever, and she wondered whether she had the power to save it, whether it was even worth fighting when she felt as though she had already lost. How could she possibly bear a child for Mr. Darcy when her body refused to cooperate?

She barely ate the breakfast before standing up to begin her search for Mr. Darcy. They met in the corridor as he was on his way to find her as well.

"Good morning, my darling," he said as he usually did and kissed her. "I do hope you slept well? I missed you last night."

"I have missed you also. It was pitiful trying to sleep without you next to me." Elizabeth took his hand in hers. "But I believe it is time we have a word. There is plenty we need to discuss."

He agreed, and she led him back into the room so they could not be overheard by the servants.

"I did quite a lot of thinking last night," she started after they sat

down.

“What conclusion did you come to?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“One that I am not sure would please either of us.” She clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

She watched as Mr. Darcy straightened up and his shoulders visibly tensed. He feared the worst and so did she. Until that moment, she did not know what she would say to him.

“What are you trying to say? Should I be concerned?”

“I do not know.” Elizabeth sighed. “I thought it might be best if we take some time apart to reflect on our troubles before deciding how to proceed.”

“Am I right in thinking you do not want to stay married to a blind and poor man? I cannot say I blame you.”

“My love, I would not care if you were a pauper. I would love you anyway. But I have denied you the very thing that a wife should provide for you.”

“You are speaking of children, are you not?” Mr. Darcy pulled Elizabeth close. “Perhaps we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that it may not be in our future. We would not be the first people to be without children. It does not mean our marriage should end.”

“You say that now, but deep down you might be holding on to the hope that it could change in time. But there is no guarantee that I will ever conceive. I shall not be able to live with myself if I robbed you of the joy that only comes from parenthood.” Saying the words hurt Elizabeth to the core of her being, but she was not able to stop herself.

Mr. Darcy removed his hand from hers. “You are choosing to walk away from our marriage?”

“I wish to never leave you,” Elizabeth said. “I only want to give you time to make a decision on how to proceed in our future knowing that we might never have a family together.”

It was important for Elizabeth to give Mr. Darcy a chance to think through whether he wanted her in his life, whether he was prepared to live the rest of his life with her alone. If she were not constantly present, it would be easier for him to think clearly. She believed he deserved a fair opportunity to consider his other options, but it also hurt her deeply to see him every day knowing she could not provide him with the happiness he deserved.

“And when do you intend to leave?” he asked simply.

“I was thinking I would accompany my parents back to Longbourn and stay there for some days.”

“Do you ever plan on returning?” His voice was low and deep, drenched in despair.

“I certainly hope so.” In her heart of hearts, she wished that Mr. Darcy would have her return after his period of contemplation.

She watched as his face crumpled. Her heart ached to see him in so much pain.

“Elizabeth, the truth is, I am the one who has robbed you of the kind of life you should have been living all along. Spending a lifetime with a blind man is no woman’s dream.”

“Your blindness has nothing to do with this,” Elizabeth said in a stern voice. “I have loved you in spite of it. In fact, perhaps I love you even more. Your blindness has never held you back from showing me how much you love me.”

Mr. Darcy held her tight, his breath fanning her skin. In his arms she felt as though she would break apart with grief.

“Very well,” he whispered. “Perhaps it’s best you go with your parents. I am wrestling with too many demons at present to be a good husband to you. Some time apart might do us both good. And if you *do* choose to return, you would find me a better man.”

“You have never been less of a man in my eyes, Mr. Darcy. This has nothing to do with you in the least. You just deserve much more than I can give you.”

“I feel the same way about you.” They continued to hold each other, neither knowing what to say or how to comfort the other. It all seemed so bleak.

Later, when Elizabeth told Mrs. Bennet that she was accompanying them back to Longbourn, her mother was beside herself. She was so shocked that for a few minutes she said nothing at all.

When at last she broke the silence, Mrs. Bennet’s tone was frantic, “Lizzie, leaving your husband behind would only open the door to other women. You cannot possibly believe it is a good idea for you to take time away from your marriage.”

“Mr. Darcy understands and we are still very much married. We only need time apart to think.” Elizabeth hoped with all her heart that she would not regret the decision she had made, but she could see no other way out of the situation.

“You should not waste time thinking,” Mrs. Bennet said in a harsh voice, “you should be conceiving a child. And in order to do that, you need to be by your husband’s side.”

“I’m amazed that you still believe it to be so simple, mama. You conceived children without struggle, but there are other women who are not as lucky. I happen to be one of them. I need to be alone to think whether it is fair for me to remain in Mr. Darcy’s life when I am unable to give him what he desires.”

Even though Mrs. Bennet was still not convinced Elizabeth should leave Pemberley, Elizabeth had made up her mind and nobody could stop her. When the time came to leave, she said a tearful goodbye to

Mr. Darcy and saw him standing at the window watching their carriage moving away from Pemberley.

The journey to Longbourn was quiet and the air in the carriage was filled with so much tension that when they finally arrived, Elizabeth let out a sigh of relief.

As she spent that first night in her childhood bed, in the room she had shared with Jane, she felt as though she had failed herself and Mr. Darcy. Even if she returned to him, would she be able to repair what was broken? Would her bruised heart ever heal? The miscarriage and every month she failed to conceive chipped away a part of her. She was not the woman she was when she married Mr. Darcy. Back then, she had been so confident, believing herself capable of giving him the life of his dreams. Now that she had failed at that, she felt completely lost.

Chapter 14

After breakfast, Mrs. Bennet immediately pulled Elizabeth aside.

The day before, Elizabeth had avoided conversing with her, but she had known it was only a matter of time before her mother demanded to speak to her.

They were now seated in the drawing room, just the two of them.

"I know what you wish to speak to me about," Elizabeth said as her mother shifted in her seat, perhaps thinking of the right words to say.

"I'm sure you do. It is no secret that I do not approve of you leaving your husband at Pemberley and hiding here."

"I would not call it hiding." Elizabeth felt her shoulders sink. She was emotionally and physically exhausted to the point that she did not even have the strength to be annoyed. "There are circumstances Mr. Darcy and I both need to ponder."

"I hope you are not thinking of leaving Mr. Darcy indefinitely. I will not allow you to bring such shame upon this family." Mrs. Bennet inhaled sharply. "I understand that you have always valued your independence and would like to do things most ladies would never consider doing, but as your mother, I would like to warn you not to make such a mistake. Mr. Darcy is the best match for you. He has the fortune and he loves you dearly."

Elizabeth agreed with what her mother was saying. She did not doubt Mr. Darcy's love for her. She also fully intended on returning to Pemberley. The question was, would Mr. Darcy want her to return or would he accept Lady Catherine's offer?

She chose not to discuss Mr. Darcy's financial situation with Mrs. Bennet without Mr. Darcy's permission. If Mrs. Bennet knew, the news would most likely also reach Lady Lucas's ears and soon after, the rest of Longbourn would know.

"I do love my husband and he loves me in return," Elizabeth said. "I also do not see a problem with me being here, visiting my family. I have done so in the past with no scandal."

"You know exactly what is wrong with it. The longer you stay away, the more chances Mr. Darcy has to think about his options,

especially now that Lady Catherine has planted a seed in his mind. What if he decides to accept her offer? The best thing is for you to return to Pemberley right away to mend your marriage and continue working hard to give him an heir. It is possible if you want it desperately enough."

"And that is all it takes?" Elizabeth could not help smiling. "Mama, I do not want to quarrel with you yet again on this matter, but bearing a child is a miracle that happens in its own perfect time. And unfortunately, one cannot rush it."

"You could speed things along, but not while you're here." Mrs. Bennet squeezed her hands. "My daughter, I only want the best for you. I want you to live a good life with Mr. Darcy, in your beautiful Pemberley. I hate to think that someone is trying to replace you."

Elizabeth squeezed her mother's hands back. "I know you have my best interests at heart, and I love you for it, but in the end, it's Mr. Darcy's decision. I cannot force him to stay with me if I am not able to give him what he wants."

"What are you saying exactly, Lizzie?" Mrs. Bennet let go of Elizabeth's hands and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Are you saying you would be all right if Mr. Darcy left you for that stick of a girl? What was her name again? Oh yes, Miss Honeyfield."

"I am saying that I love my husband enough to let him go if my absence would lead to his happiness."

"Do not be foolish, child. If Mr. Darcy leaves you, what would become of you?"

"I shall be all right."

"You would have to spend the rest of your life alone. No man would want to enter into a marriage with someone who had been discarded by her husband. Do you understand that Lizzie?" Mrs. Bennet's expression had changed to one of disappointment. "The best thing you can do right now is fight for your husband. Fight for your marriage. Do not give up that easily. The Bennets do not surrender."

"Dear mama, I do not want to disrespect you, but this is a conversation that I would rather have with Mr. Darcy. It is our marriage and we shall make the right choices for ourselves."

Elizabeth could not bear the idea of a life without Mr. Darcy, and the thought of him being with another woman made her feel ill, but what good would it do her if he stayed with her when he was unhappy? Perhaps he would be okay with not having children for a few more years, but what would happen five or ten years into the future? What would happen once Elizabeth reached an age where she was no longer able to bear children? Would he not resent her for it?

"I wish you were not so stubborn," Mrs. Bennet said. "You get it from your father."

“And father would most likely say I got it from you.” Elizabeth forced a smile. “I would like to go to Meryton. I might also pay Lydia a visit.”

Mrs. Bennet was glad to hear this, as she herself was forbidden to see Lydia by Mr. Wickham. “Perhaps you can convince her to call on us. That husband of hers would not even allow me to visit my grandchildren.”

“If Mr. Wickham allows me to enter their home, I will certainly try.” Elizabeth stood and left the room before the conversation returned to her and Mr. Darcy’s marriage.

The last time she saw Lydia was a year ago, when her second child, a girl, was born. Since then, they had all been locked out of her life by Mr. Wickham, so she was forced to depend solely on him. Elizabeth could not imagine how awful it must be to be married to such a controlling husband.

Lydia had seemed so unhappy that day, and Elizabeth remembered thinking that perhaps Mr. Wickham feared that if he let her out of his sight, she would run away. She had heard that he was a jealous man.

Lydia had never admitted that she made a mistake by marrying Mr. Wickham, but Elizabeth was able to read it in her eyes. She guessed that her pain was fueled by the rumors that Mr. Wickham had been seen with other women. It infuriated Elizabeth to know he disrespected her sister in that manner.

Just as Elizabeth was about to leave the house, Kitty offered to accompany her to Meryton. Elizabeth kindly rejected her offer because she was desperate to be alone.

She quite enjoyed the walk to Meryton, remembering the days when in their younger years, she and her sisters had trodden the same path, singing and laughing without a care in the world. Those times had been so much simpler for all of them.

When she arrived in Meryton, she was exhausted, but also exhilarated. For a while, she wandered around her familiar surroundings, walking in and out of shops and the gallery, greeting people she knew. She did her best not to think of her troubles at all as she enjoyed her solitary time. She no longer felt burdened after the conversation she had had with her mother.

She also stopped for some tea, which she drank while reading a book she had brought with her. She had loved doing that when she lived in Longbourn.

Just as she was leaving the coffee house to make her way to Lydia and Mr. Wickham’s cottage, which was just on the outskirts of Meryton, she chanced to see her sister walking past the milliner’s shop. Her shoulders were hunched and her hair disheveled as it hung around her head. Even from a distance, she looked unhappy, with no

spring in her step whatsoever.

“Lydia,” Elizabeth called, hurrying toward her. “Oh, dear Lydia.” Elizabeth was so glad to see her sister outside. She had feared Mr. Wickham would have refused her entry to their home.

Lydia turned around, and when she saw Elizabeth, she started hurrying in the opposite direction.

“Lydia, what are you doing?” Elizabeth called after her, increasing her pace, her heart pounding.

Without responding, Lydia kept going, glancing behind her occasionally to see how far Elizabeth was.

Elizabeth grabbed her skirts and started running after her only to trip on a rock that protruded from the ground.

She cursed under her breath as she struggled to get to her feet. Pain shot through her knee.

When next Lydia glanced behind her and saw what had happened to Elizabeth, she came to a halt and fully turned around. Their eyes met and Elizabeth prayed Lydia would come to her. If she did not, Elizabeth would know that her sister had completely cut them out of her life.

To her delight, Lydia made her way back.

“Are you okay, Lizzie?” she asked in a voice filled with shame. “Have you been hurt?”

“I struck my knee, that is all.” Elizabeth struggled to get to her feet.

“Let me have a look,” Lydia lifted Elizabeth’s skirt just enough to see blood trickling down her leg. “You’re bleeding. You need to have the wound looked at right away.”

“I feel fine. It’s not much blood,” Elizabeth assured her, but she felt dizzy. “I had wanted to come and see you.” She pulled Lydia into an embrace and tears of joy flooded her eyes. “I have missed you. Why would you run away from me, Lydia?”

Lydia said nothing, but she did not pull away from Elizabeth.

“Mr. Wickham told me to stay away from you.” Lydia pulled away then, her eyes also brimming with tears. “He said that all we have are each other because you all don’t approve of our union.”

Elizabeth took her by the shoulders. “You cannot allow him to alienate you from your family. We love you. You have made your decision to marry him and we have accepted it, but I shall only be happy for you if you are happy.”

Lydia took Elizabeth’s arm. “Let’s find a carriage to return you to Longbourn, that is where you’re staying, am I right?”

“Yes, I’m visiting for a number of days.”

“Good. I shall go with you to ensure you arrive safely.” Lydia ignored everything Elizabeth had said to her and said nothing more

about it as she accompanied Elizabeth to Longbourn. Elizabeth knew, however, that Lydia was taking a risk by returning to her childhood home. If Mr. Wickham found out, she figured he may become enraged.

Regardless, for now Lydia belonged to them once more.

Chapter 15

M

r. Darcy was just about to end his meeting with Mr. Ramsbury who had come to see him from London, when Mrs. Brooks notified him that he had a guest. Before Mr. Darcy could ask who the guest was, he suddenly heard his voice and turned his head toward the sound, almost jumping out of his seat.

“Good morning, Darcy,” Mr. Wickham said. “I hope I’m not disturbing you. I have an important matter to discuss with you.”

“I am afraid it will have to wait.” Mr. Darcy ground the words between his teeth. “I am currently in an important meeting with my financial advisor.” He had last encountered Mr. Wickham four months before in London by chance. Speaking to Mr. Wickham was the last thing he felt like doing, but he knew Mr. Wickham would not leave until he said what he had come to say to him.

“What I have to discuss with you cannot wait. It would only take a few minutes of your time.”

Mr. Darcy felt his fists curl at his sides. “This meeting is equally important. I shall speak to you once I am done.” Mr. Darcy gazed in the direction of the door.

For a brief moment he thought he could see two people’s silhouettes, but he could not be sure whether his mind was playing tricks on him. He decided it was and pushed the thought from his mind. He was in the process of making peace with his condition once and for all. There was no point in holding on to hope where there was none.

“Mrs. Brooks, would you care to show Mr. Wickham to the sitting room?”

“No need,” Mr. Wickham said in a cool tone. “As a child, this was my home. I am familiar enough with the estate to find my way to the sitting room.”

Mr. Darcy said nothing as he turned his attention back to Mr. Ramsbury.

“I apologize for the disturbance.” Mr. Darcy lowered his voice. “As I was saying before, I would of course like to recover some of the fortune I have lost. Would you have advice on what actions I could

take going forward?"

Mr. Ramsbury was silent for a while, the silence only broken by the sound of his ragged breathing. "Mr. Darcy, there *are* several other minor investments you made in the past. Before we discuss the future, it might be best for me to look into them in case some have yielded profits."

"That is a sound idea," Mr. Darcy said. "Perhaps we should meet again in a week or two in London. I appreciate you coming all this way to speak to me."

"It's no trouble at all. I had other clients to meet in these parts of the country." Mr. Darcy listened to Mr. Ramsbury shift in his seat. "There is something else I had actually come to share with you as well as my other clients. I thought it best to do it in person."

"It must be quite important."

"It is. The thing is, Mr. Darcy, our next meeting will be our last."

"Why is that?" Mr. Darcy frowned.

"I plan to retire from this kind of business, or perhaps take a long break."

"Is that so?" Mr. Darcy asked, both surprised and disappointed. "I do not consider you to be of retirement age." Mr. Darcy knew that Mr. Ramsbury was perhaps only four or five years older than he was. "I hope all is well with your business."

"It is my ill health that is forcing me to retire early, or at least take a long break. Should I decide to reenter the business, I shall inform you."

"I see." Mr. Darcy nodded, his heart heavy with disappointment. "I fully understand. Your health should be your first priority. Should you decide to reenter the business, I would appreciate it if you notify me."

After his failed investments, losing his trusted financial advisor would bring on further stress. Mr. Darcy had entrusted Mr. Ramsbury with his finances for several years, and in those many years, it was the first time that he had to deal with such a drastic loss of fortune. It would be a great adjustment having to go on the search for a new financial advisor, but he had no choice. He had to wish him well.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I will be sure to do so. In the meantime, I shall look into your other investments. When you come to London, I shall also introduce you to several friends of mine in this field should you wish to have them handle your affairs after my departure."

With a heavy heart, Mr. Darcy thanked Mr. Ramsbury and said goodbye to him, shaking his hand warmly.

While Mrs. Brooks showed Mr. Ramsbury to the door, Mr. Darcy remained in his study, gathering his courage before facing Mr. Wickham, the man he had grown up with and treated like a brother, but also the man who had betrayed him in many ways.

He was not alone for long before Mr. Wickham invited himself into the study.

“Am I worthy of your attention now, Darcy,” Mr. Wickham said, his voice tainted by sarcasm.

“You speak with the confidence of someone I am indebted to, when in truth, I owe you nothing.”

“I am not here to discuss what is owed or not owed to me.” The sound of a chair scraping the wood alerted Mr. Darcy that Mr. Wickham was taking a seat.

“What is it you wish to speak to me about?” Mr. Darcy turned, arms folded in front of his chest. “Have you not done enough damage? First my eyes and then my finances?”

“I am to blame for you eyesight, that is true and I have apologized profusely many times. But when it comes to the matter of your finances, I have nothing to do with it.”

Mr. Darcy let out a bitter chuckle. “When I last saw you in London, was it not you who gave me the advice to sink funds into an investment that has failed and lost me quite a large amount of money?”

Mr. Wickham said nothing. The air in the room crackled with tension as the two men waited for the other to speak.

“You have nothing to say to me?” Mr. Darcy asked.

When they came across each other in London, Mr. Wickham had invited Mr. Darcy to have a drink with him. During their brief time together, he had profusely apologized to him for everything he had done in the past. For the first time ever, he had seemed so sincere that Mr. Darcy was fooled into believing perhaps the time had come for them to mend their fences. Mr. Wickham had proceeded to tell Mr. Darcy that he wished to make up for ruining his life and had shared with him information pertaining to what he had claimed to be a secret investment that yielded great results.

He had also revealed to Mr. Darcy that he had already invested, and urged him to do so as well before it became public knowledge. Mr. Darcy had been skeptical, but when Mr. Ramsbury later confirmed that the investment was indeed a gold mine, he had decided to go ahead with it. As it turned out, listening to Mr. Wickham’s advice was a mistake that had cost him dearly.

“I am not to blame for your loss of fortune. As we both know, no investment guarantees positive returns. You are familiar enough with the financial world to know that everything is a risk.”

“You had seemed quite sure that the investment would make me a fortune, Wickham, and I had been foolish enough to believe that you would lead me in the right path.” Mr. Darcy made his way across the room until he reached a chair and lowered himself into it. “Here I was

thinking that I could learn to trust you, that we could overcome our differences. But instead, I fell victim to your schemes.” Mr. Darcy now knew that Mr. Wickham would continue to be as selfish as he had always been. There was absolutely nothing left of the boy he grew up with.

“I apologize deeply that the investment did not yield the results you had expected, but now that you find yourself in a dire financial situation, I might be able to assist you.”

Mr. Darcy laughed out loud. “And I would be foolish again to accept any assistance you claim to offer me.” He clenched his fists tight until his nails bit into his palms. “I do not understand why you are here, Wickham. It would be best for both of us if you leave.”

“Not until you hear me out,” Mr. Wickham said. “I choose to forgive your lack of kindness. After all, you’re currently going through quite a difficult time with your wife’s bareness and—”

“Don’t you dare speak of Elizabeth that way.” Mr. Darcy jabbed a finger in Mr. Wickham’s direction, his hand shaking, his blood rushing through his ears. “You have no permission to even let my wife’s name cross your lips.”

“I’m afraid that is impossible. Since Elizabeth is my sister-in-law, I shall speak of her quite often.”

“What are you here for, Wickham?” Mr. Darcy barked. “What do you want that you have not already taken?”

“As I said before, I have come to offer you my assistance.”

“I cannot see how you intend on doing that.”

“I figure that since you find yourself in quite a terrible financial situation, you will be unable to keep Pemberley for much longer. There will come a time where you will be forced to sell. And I have come to make you the first offer. Unlike you, I have recently come into quite a bit of money.”

“How dare you,” Mr. Darcy’s voice cut like a newly sharpened sword in the space between them. He had never considered himself to be a violent man, but Mr. Wickham had a way of bringing out a darker side of him. “How dare you walk into my home and threaten to take it away from me?”

“It is a home that was once mine, if you remember correctly. I may not have been a blood relative of the Darcy’s, but your father had embraced me like a son and begged me to accept Pemberley as my home.” Mr. Wickham inhaled sharply. “And since my finances have increased drastically, thanks to the right financial decisions I made in the past, I am ready to make you an above market offer for Pemberley.”

“Never.” Mr. Darcy’s entire body locked with rage. “You’re foolish to think you could just waltz into here and expect me to offer you my

home.”

“As I said before, you’re not offering it to me. I would like to buy it from you for a good price.”

Mr. Darcy was so shocked about Mr. Wickham’s offer that he was unable to speak for quite some time. He should have known that the man would not give up easily. He still held a grudge for the time when Mr. Darcy refused to offer him funds that he could gamble away. “Never,” he said again. “Pemberley is my home, not yours.”

“Are you sure you can afford to turn down my offer? You have lost quite a fortune. Would you prefer to remain at Pemberley and struggle to keep it standing, or would you rather go on the search for a place that you can afford?”

“I need you to leave,” Mr. Darcy said, pushing himself to his feet. “I need you to go and never return.”

“Your pride will be your downfall,” Mr. Wickham scoffed.

“So be it. I’d rather it’s my pride than my foolishness. I shall never fall victim to your schemes again. And I shall recover from this and keep Pemberley.”

“Very well.” Mr. Wickham blew out a breath. “I do hope you do not come running to me when your situation worsens.”

“That would never happen. You are the last person I would ever ask for help.” Not only would Mr. Darcy not accept assistance from Mr. Wickham, he would also not accept Lady Catherine’s help if it required him to marry someone he did not love in exchange for losing someone he loved dearly. He would remain true to Elizabeth whether she bore him an heir or not.

“I shall take my leave, then,” Mr. Wickham said. “But I shall return when Pemberley will cost me almost nothing to acquire.”

Mr. Darcy was still shaking long after Mr. Wickham walked out. When the servants attempted to speak to him, he found himself snapping at them, but apologized immediately. Mr. Wickham was making him a man he never wanted to become, a blind and bitter man.

It was a good thing that Elizabeth was not at Pemberley to see him in such a state. He would pull himself together and sort things out before she returned. He loved her too much to let her go.

Chapter 16

When Elizabeth and Lydia arrived at the house, Mrs. Bennet rushed out to meet them. At first, she reprimanded Lydia for staying away, but then she embraced her with tears in her eyes. Her joy was much greater than her annoyance.

Once they were in the house and were enjoying tea and cake in the parlor, Lydia admitted to them all that she was terribly unhappy. She called Mr. Wickham a cheat and a liar, and admitted that he was seeing other women while she was not allowed to even glance in a man's direction without coming under his suspicion. Her emotions overwhelmed her, and she started to cry bitter tears. Her family comforted her as best they could.

"You should have come to us for help," Elizabeth said, blinking back her own tears. "You should have told us the truth of what was going on."

Lydia wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I feared you would gloat if you knew that I regretted marrying Mr. Wickham. You had warned me from the start that I was making a mistake by getting involved with him. Offering to comfort him after the loss of a wife he had never been faithful to was foolish. He had assured me the rumors were false, and I believed him. I should have listened to you instead."

"But we love you and we have your best interests at heart." Elizabeth wished to go on, to assure Lydia of their love, but the sudden sharp pain in her knee reminded her of the fall she had taken. She had been so happy to be in Lydia's presence that she had nearly forgotten. The pain was now sharp enough to make her head swim with dizziness.

"You look unwell, Lizzie," Lydia said, sounding as though from a distance. "Is it your wound? Perhaps we should call for the medic."

Elizabeth did not think that her lack of strength was anything to worry about, but once Mrs. Bennet heard what had happened, she insisted on having her examined.

DR. SKINNER, a good friend of the Bennet family, arrived not long after Mr. Bennet sent the footman to fetch him. Elizabeth quickly explained her symptoms as Mrs. Bennet sat nearby.

"I'm certain there is nothing to worry about," she said as the doctor finished dressing her wound and examined her. "The wound is barely visible. It should heal in no time."

"I'm afraid there is something to worry about." Dr. Skinner lifted his gaze to hers. "You mentioned that you had been running after your sister when dizziness overcame you."

"Yes, that is correct." Elizabeth's breathing accelerated. "Is something the matter with me?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Darcy, but you should not be running in your condition."

Elizabeth tilted her head to one side. "Condition?"

He frowned, a deep line forming between his bushy eyebrows. "Are you not aware that you are with child?"

Elizabeth went silent and Mrs. Bennet rose to her feet, her eyes wide. "Is that true, Dr. Skinner? Is Elizabeth truly with child?"

Dr. Skinner turned to her with a smile. "I am certain of it."

"But how can that be?" Elizabeth asked in a whisper, her fingers touching her parted lips. "I was examined a few weeks ago, and the doctor assured me that was not the case."

"The doctor who examined you must have missed the signs, but I have never been wrong in such a case. I can assure you that you *are* with child." Dr. Skinner's smile grew wider, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes. "Congratulations, Mrs. Darcy. As far as I can tell, your baby is doing just fine. But it would be best for you not to overexert yourself any longer."

The doctor gave Elizabeth information on how she should take care of herself now that she was expecting a child, and when he left, Elizabeth was still speechless from the shock of it all.

After congratulating her wholeheartedly, Mrs. Bennet ran to call Mr. Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty so they could partake of the good news.

The family was overjoyed for Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, but within all the excitement, Elizabeth was also terrified. She had once experienced the joy of pregnancy only to lose the child not long after. She remembered the pain all too well. But it could also be that this baby was meant to come into the world. She chose to believe that instead of focusing on her fears.

"I am so happy for you, Lizzie." Mrs. Bennet clapped her hands together. "Your marriage with Mr. Darcy is now secure."

Elizabeth's heart swelled at the mention of Mr. Darcy. She could hardly wait to tell him the good news. Although she had planned on staying longer at Longbourn, she would not be able to contain her

excitement. She hoped with all her heart that the good news would lift Mr. Darcy's spirits during their financial struggles.

"I apologize, mama and papa, but I believe it's best I return to Pemberley as soon as possible."

"Certainly," Mr. Bennet said, a grin splitting his features. "You should be with your husband."

Not long after, while Elizabeth was packing her belongings, Lydia joined her in the room.

"I must apologize to you, Lizzie." She perched on the edge of the bed and glanced up at Elizabeth with sadness in her eyes.

"I do not see what for." Elizabeth sat down next to her sister. She was glad that Lydia had come to visit their family. Whatever grievances they held between them were long forgotten. "It was not your fault that I fell."

"It certainly was," Lydia said with a soft chuckle, "but that is not what I meant to apologize for."

"Lydia, you have done me no wrong. Why look so upset?"

"Because my husband has done you wrong, you and Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth straightened up and merely stared at Lydia, questions in her eyes. "I do not understand what you mean."

Lydia covered her face with her hands. "Mr. Wickham has made it his mission to rob Mr. Darcy of his entire fortune, part of which he believes belongs to him."

"But he has no power to do such a thing." Elizabeth would not reveal to Lydia that most of his fortune had already been lost. It would not be fair to Mr. Darcy for her to speak of their financial struggles just yet, especially when the news could easily reach Mr. Wickham.

"But he has succeeded." Lydia dropped her hands into her lap, but she would not look Elizabeth in the eye. "I am not sure whether you are aware, but Mr. Darcy had not long ago made a great investment that promised to yield big returns."

Elizabeth nodded, feeling sick to her stomach. Lydia clearly knew more about their finances than she had thought. There was no longer a reason for her to hide information from her. "Yes, the investment failed and my husband lost quite a fortune." Elizabeth stopped herself from saying more. "How do you know about all this?"

"Because I have evidence to prove that Mr. Wickham was involved in Mr. Darcy's loss of fortune. The investment has yielded the fortune that had been promised, but my husband has forged papers that enabled him to steal Mr. Darcy's returns."

"But how is that possible?" Elizabeth instinctively placed a hand on her stomach as though to protect her baby from some unknown danger.

"He is good friends with Mr. Darcy's financial advisor, Mr.

Ramsbury. They have been plotting together for quite some time to steal from Mr. Darcy.” When Lydia looked back at Elizabeth’s shocked face, there were tears in her eyes. “I have been struggling with this secret for a long time, but you are expecting a child and I cannot allow my husband to steal from you any longer. He is a cruel man.”

“Lydia,” Elizabeth whispered. “Are you completely sure about what you’re telling me?”

Lydia nodded. “I came across letters that Mr. Wickham had been receiving from Mr. Ramsbury.”

Elizabeth felt her stomach turn with anger toward Mr. Wickham. “Are you saying they tricked Mr. Darcy into investing so they could steal from him?”

“Yes. And yesterday, Mr. Ramsbury, who is currently staying at an inn in Meryton, came to call on us. Without meaning to, I overheard their conversation. They were celebrating their success and discussing how they intended to share the money.”

“I do not know what to say.” Elizabeth was infuriated and her heart hurt so deeply for Mr. Darcy. Mr. Wickham had already done so much to wrong him. She had not expected that he was determined to completely ruin him. He had already taken his eyesight and now he had stolen his fortune as well. Mr. Darcy needed to know as soon as possible. “Lydia, would you mind if I share this information with Mr. Darcy? I understand that, as Mr. Wickham’s wife, this puts you in a difficult position but—”

“Mr. Wickham is not the man I thought he was.” Lydia dropped her head. “I had loved him so, but I can no longer ignore his cruelty toward the people I care about.” She closed her eyes, squeezing out more tears. “And toward me and the children.”

Elizabeth turned Lydia to face her. “Tell me he has not laid a hand on you.”

Elizabeth received her answer when Lydia did not respond. “I am so sorry, dear Lydia. I am truly sorry.” She pulled her sister into an embrace, repressing her anger toward Mr. Wickham so as to not upset Lydia. “You did not have to keep all this to yourself, to suffer alone.”

“I was ashamed.” Lydia’s sobs racked her body. “You had all warned me about Mr. Wickham, and I had ignored all your advice. Now I am paying dearly for my mistakes.” Lydia pulled away from Elizabeth and smoothed down her plain, wrinkled dress. “I should hurry home before he returns. He will be furious that I betrayed him.”

“Do you really think it’s best for you to return to him, Lydia?”

“I have no choice,” Lydia said. “I must return to my children.”

“I understand. Then go and collect your children and bring them back with you to Longbourn. You are safer here. Speak to mama and papa and they will help you.”

Lydia simply nodded, but Elizabeth did not believe that she would leave Mr. Wickham. He had such a strong hold on her. It would be hard for her to pull away. Unfortunately, Elizabeth had no time to convince Lydia. She needed to speak to Mr. Darcy as soon as possible before any more damage was done.

That evening, Elizabeth returned to Pemberley, excited for herself, but also heartbroken for her sister.

Chapter 17

Two weeks after Elizabeth notified Mr. Darcy of Mr. Wickham's betrayal, the time came for the two men to come face to face once more.

Upon discovering that Lydia had betrayed him, Mr. Wickham had fled to London, but a week later, after the authorities were notified, he was found in a gaming club and arrested. Mr. Ramsbury was also arrested not long after. Mr. Darcy now knew that his former financial advisor, a man he had trusted for years, was about to leave his business in order to enjoy the money he had stolen from him.

Fortunately for Mr. Darcy, he had not lost his entire fortune to Mr. Wickham and Mr. Ramsbury as the theft had been reported in good time. As it turned out, Mr. Darcy's winnings from the investment had not yet been transferred to Mr. Wickham's accounts. And it was all thanks to Lydia's courage in telling Elizabeth the truth.

Now, Mr. Darcy was visiting Mr. Wickham's new residence: a prison on the outskirts of London.

The man Mr. Darcy had known since childhood, now sat opposite him at a scarred wooden table, inside a room that smelled stale and damp.

Although Mr. Darcy was unable to see Mr. Wickham's face, he could feel his scathing glare.

"Why have you come?" Mr. Wickham asked, his voice devoid of remorse. "Have you come to gloat?"

"I have certainly not come to be insulted by the likes of you," Mr. Darcy replied. "I have come in the hopes that you would offer me a much overdue apology."

Mr. Wickham snorted. "I have nothing to apologize for. Whatever I took was rightfully mine."

"Wrong. My father had taken you under his wing. He treated you like a son. I treated you like a brother. We were not obligated to do any of that."

"Nonsense," Mr. Wickham roared, his fist hitting the table with such impact that it shook. "You have treated me like a piece of dirt."

Mr. Darcy felt as though a rock had been hurled at his heart. After

everything he had done for Mr. Wickham, and all the times he had forgiven him, the man still believed himself to be the one wronged.

Stumped about what to say next, Mr. Darcy allowed silence to fall between them.

“How is my traitor of a wife?” Mr. Wickham asked after the silence became unbearable for both of them. “Does she truly believe she can have a good life without me?”

“We shall provide for her. She was brave enough to stand against you and to reveal your treachery. She deserves to be rewarded for her bravery.”

“She is just a bitter woman because I had mistresses all through our marriage and during our brief courtship.”

“And do you believe that is an accomplishment to be proud of?” Mr. Darcy’s breath shook with fury.

“She was unable to satisfy me fully. It was my right to find satisfaction elsewhere.”

“She is better off without you.” Mr. Darcy clenched his hands into fists. “I shall make sure that she and her children are well taken care of.”

“You call yourself a man of honor and yet you are keeping a man away from his children?”

“I am not the one keeping you from your children, Wickham. You alone are responsible for your misfortune.” Mr. Darcy waited for the words to sink in before continuing. “From what Lydia has revealed to us, you are not much of a father anyway. How could you be, if you were never present?”

“And you’re not much of a man—judging my worth as a father when you are incapable of fathering a child.”

Mr. Darcy inhaled deeply, then blew out a breath. “I am a better man than you could ever be. And although it does not concern you, Elizabeth is with child.”

Mr. Darcy could not see Mr. Wickham’s face, but he was able to sense his shock.

Since Mr. Wickham had lost his ability to speak, Mr. Darcy continued. “Even if I wanted to have you released, I have no such power, as I am not the only person you and Mr. Ramsbury attempted to steal from.”

“I did what I had to do in order to feed my family.” Mr. Wickham was so close that Mr. Darcy felt drops of his spittle landing on his face. “And everything I did was your fault since you refused to offer me any assistance.”

“Then you have a rather short memory.” Mr. Darcy pushed back his chair and stood. “And your thievery had nothing to do with feeding your family. Instead, you were only thinking of your selfish

pursuits of gambling and drinking. Lydia also revealed to us that she had to secretly work in order to feed the children you claim to care for. You deserve to face the consequences of your actions. As long as you refuse to admit your wrongdoings, there is absolutely nothing I can do for you.”

“At least, unlike you, I won’t have to spend my entire life in darkness. It is a suitable punishment for your greediness and cruelty toward me.”

Mr. Darcy was no longer able to respond as he reached for his stick and walked away from Mr. Wickham, who continued to hurl insults his way.

Outside the prison, Mr. Bingley was waiting for Mr. Darcy. He had offered to accompany him to London in case he needed his support.

Mr. Darcy shared with Mr. Bingley what had transpired between him and Mr. Wickham. His friend was just as shocked by Mr. Wickham’s behavior.

Later that day, after Mr. Darcy had met with a new financial advisor, he and Mr. Bingley had a drink to celebrate Mr. Darcy’s new life and future heir.

Unlike the previous times she had been expecting, Elizabeth seemed stronger and healthier. Mr. Darcy prayed each day that it meant she would be able to carry the baby to term, and make him the happiest man there ever was. Despite the fact that his eyes still refused to see, despite the persistent headaches and flashes of light, he had never been happier.

Chapter 18

Elizabeth was perfectly content. Her hand was on her growing middle as she watched her sister Lydia playing with her children on the grounds of Pemberley.

After Mr. Wickham's arrest, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had invited Lydia and her children to stay with them. They had sufficient room and Elizabeth wanted to be close enough to offer her sister all the support she needed, especially after everything she had endured at the hands of Mr. Wickham.

Upon arriving at Pemberley, Lydia had stayed locked away in her room for long periods of time, ashamed to face the world, ashamed to face her sister, only emerging occasionally for meals. Elizabeth had not thought less of her in the least and had instructed the servants to meet her every need, and to care for the children.

Two days ago, Lydia emerged, looking rested, with no shadows under her eyes.

Elizabeth had always known that Mr. Wickham was not good for Lydia, especially after he kept her from their family. But now she knew the reasons why Lydia still remained with him. She had been horrified to discover scars on Lydia's body that he had inflicted. He had not only abused her emotions, but her body as well.

But that was all in the past, and she grew healthier and more confident by the day. Her children, too, were no longer as withdrawn as they had been when they arrived at Pemberley.

Elizabeth moved her hand over her stomach and smiled as she watched the children chasing their mother, laughter spilling from their lips. At this moment, she could think of nothing that had the power to taint her spirits; however, her mind kept returning to the letter she had received that morning.

"You look deep in thought," Lydia said when she came to Elizabeth a moment later, while the children continued to play.

"I was." Elizabeth smiled up at Lydia. "Come and sit with me." She pointed to a chair next to her.

"Thank you," Lydia said in a soft voice.

Even though she was on the mend, she was a different person from

the girl Elizabeth had grown up with, afraid of nothing and ready to take on the world. Elizabeth was nevertheless grateful that her sister was much more appreciative and respectful of her family and all the good things in her life. Now that she had faced many trials, she cared more for others than herself.

“Would you care to share what’s on your mind?” Lydia lowered herself into the chair. “I hope it is not me you are concerned about.”

“Not at all.” Elizabeth touched her hand. “This morning, I received a letter from Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“Mr. Darcy’s aunt?”

Elizabeth nodded. “She has never written to me before.”

“What did she have to say? I hope her words were not to insult you further.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Not at all. And I find that quite surprising.” She pulled in a breath. “In fact, she wrote to apologize to me. She also congratulated me on the pregnancy and wished Mr. Darcy and I well.”

“I barely know Her Ladyship. I only met her once, but even to me, she did not seem like the kind of person who would apologize to anyone for anything.”

“My sentiments exactly. But in her letter, she begged me to believe she had changed her ways. Apparently, it is due to an illness that has struck her kidneys. She believes she will not live much longer and wishes to make amends with those she has wronged in her lifetime.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Lydia asked, her eyes on her children.

“I never wish anyone ill, even those who have wronged me. I pray that she recovers from her illness and is able to continue living her life.”

Lydia glanced back at her. “Are you prepared to offer her the forgiveness she begged you for?”

“Perhaps in time. But if I do so, it would be for Mr. Darcy’s and my sake, not hers. I’m desperate for the peace that forgiveness would afford me as I would like to enjoy this life we are bringing into the world without any shadows on my heart.”

“That is quite commendable of you.” Lydia patted Elizabeth’s hand. “Does Mr. Darcy know of his aunt’s illness?”

“If he does, he has not mentioned it to me. I shall tell him about the letter when he arrives later this evening.”

For the rest of the day, Elizabeth and Lydia spent a lovely time in each other’s company, and when Mr. Darcy arrived shortly after dinner, Elizabeth read the letter she had received from Lady Catherine de Bourgh aloud.

After she was done, Mr. Darcy told her that he had no knowledge

of the illness.

"I only hope she is not feigning illness in order to get back in our good graces."

"I do not believe so. What kind of person would wish such misfortune upon themselves?"

"You may be right. Although it does surprise me that she is asking for your forgiveness. And how does she know you are with child? I have not told her."

"Charlotte must have told her."

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth had decided from the start that they would not tell Lady Catherine about their situation as they did not want to give her a new way to meddle in their lives and upset Elizabeth. Elizabeth had told her friend Charlotte, however, who was married to Mr. Collins and was in constant contact with Her Ladyship.

Mr. Darcy pulled Elizabeth into his arms. "I want you to know that you do not have to respond if you do not wish to. Lady Catherine has caused you much suffering over the years and it is completely natural that you find it hard to forgive her."

Elizabeth rested her head on her husband's shoulder and closed her eyes. "I will respond to her. I will tell her that I forgive her, but only because she is your aunt. I only have one request."

"Whatever you need," Mr. Darcy said.

"I would not like to see her before the child is born. You are free to visit her and care for her during her illness, but I would not like to be in her presence."

"I fully understand and I agree."

Before they withdrew for the evening, Mr. Darcy told Elizabeth about his meeting with Mr. Wickham, and how shamefully the man had behaved.

"I am only glad he is far from Lydia. I would not like him to harm her any longer." Elizabeth paused. "I asked if she would ever visit him in prison and she said she never wants to see him again."

"I can assure you that he will be put away for a long time. The investigations have revealed his involvement in so much criminal activity that even I do not have the power to help him regain his freedom."

Elizabeth sighed. "I am sorry, my darling. It must be hard for you to see a man you had considered to be a brother go to prison. I wish I could make the pain go away."

"You already have." Mr. Darcy placed his hand on her midsection, where their child was growing by the day. "You continue to do so every day, in every way."

Elizabeth only smiled, unable to believe that she had finally found satisfaction and joy in her life. She could hardly wait to give Mr.

Darcy his own heir.

Chapter 19

Elizabeth woke up from a deep sleep in the middle of the night.

The room was thick with darkness and the air smelled of candles that had been lit hours ago.

Mr. Darcy was fast asleep next to her, a protective arm around her body. His gentle breathing and the beating of her own heart were the only sounds she heard.

As Elizabeth watched her husband sleep, a surge of affection caused her chest to bubble with joy. She was careful not to wake him. She enjoyed watching him sleep and was grateful that he could finally rest without the many cares he had before. She knew that his deep sleep was also partly due to the contentment that he would soon become a father. Never did a day go by without him telling her how he could not wait to hold their child in his arms.

He smiled now more than usual, even more so after returning from London the day before. He had met with his new financial advisor and shared with Elizabeth that their finances had recovered. It was a great weight off his shoulders.

She turned her gaze from Mr. Darcy and blinked several times to help her eyes adjust to the night. At the same time she searched her mind for what could have roused her from sleep. She could not recall having a terrible dream so it must have been something else. But what?

It only took a few heartbeats for her to know what had woken her. It started as a gentle nudge in the pit of her stomach that quickly transformed into a sharp pain that sliced through her like a knife and stole her breath.

She clutched her swollen stomach and winced, eyes shut, heart pounding inside her chest. When another pain arrested her, fear and panic welled up inside her throat.

She opened her eyes and bit into her trembling bottom lip. It could not happen, not again, not after she had almost recovered from the last time. Not when Mr. Darcy was so sure he would be a father.

She needed to get out of bed, to distance herself from him before he discovered she was in pain. He could not know, not yet. Perhaps

she would be able to recover before he even awoke. If he saw her in such a state, she would not be able to bear the disappointment on his face after all the excitement of the past four months. She was still able to clearly recall the pain etched into his features the year before, when she had told him that their child would never see the light of day.

Mr. Darcy was so sure that this time it would happen for them, and only yesterday at dinner they discussed potential names for the child. They had not decided on one yet as they could not come to an agreement. They finally decided that they would choose a name as soon as the child was born.

Tears thickened Elizabeth's throat as she thought of the possibility that her child might not survive. If that was the case, it would be a clear sign that they were doomed to a life without children. She would be so grieved that perhaps she would never recover from a second loss. She would also no longer have the strength to fight fate.

Clenching her teeth, Elizabeth lifted Mr. Darcy's arm from her body and slid out of bed, barely able to breathe from the pain and fear that assailed her. As she made her way to the door in the darkness, more waves of pain rolled through her and sweat dripped from her brow into her eyes.

Her hand tight around her stomach, she stumbled out of the room, tears in her eyes. She did not stop moving until she reached Mrs. Brooks's door at the servants' quarters. She took a breath, then knocked softly.

Even though Mrs. Brooks was always on alert whenever she was needed, night or day, Elizabeth hardly ever asked for her help in the night. She and Mr. Darcy believed that their servants deserved rest as much as they did and they refrained from bothering them unless it was in an emergency.

To her surprise, she found the older woman awake, the light of a burning candle lighting up her room.

"Mrs. Darcy," Mrs. Brooks said, her brow knitted. "Why are you awake at this time of night?"

"I apologize for disturbing you. I need... I need your help, Mrs. Brooks." Elizabeth gasped when another wave of pain hit her. "I fear it's happening again." She did not have to go into detail for Mrs. Brooks to know what she meant.

Many of the servants in the Pemberley household did not know that Elizabeth had a miscarriage a few months ago. The one person who knew was Mrs. Brooks as she had been present when it had happened. Elizabeth had cried on her shoulders before Mr. Darcy even knew the tragedy that had befallen them. It was Mrs. Brooks who tended to Elizabeth until she was able to leave the room—weeks after her loss—and continued to tell her that she should not lose hope.

Since she arrived at Pemberley as Mr. Darcy's wife, Mrs. Brooks had shown more love and understanding toward Elizabeth than even her own mother was capable of.

Mrs. Brooks glanced at Elizabeth stomach, which she protectively covered with both her hands. Her gaze reached up to Elizabeth's, and she saw reflected in her eyes the same kind of vivid fear that she, herself, felt.

"Goodness, no." Mrs. Brooks's fingers touched her lips. "No, Mrs. Darcy. I refuse to believe it." She put an arm around Elizabeth and pulled her into the room. "Stay here. I shall send Mr. Wilson to get Dr. Crew at once." Mrs. Brooks helped Elizabeth into a chair and then rushed out moments later.

Elizabeth breathed in air that smelled faintly of vanilla, the scent that always seemed to follow Mrs. Brooks around. It soothed her only for a moment before she doubled over again in agony.

Unable to bear the intensity of the pain any longer and too restless to remain seated, she pushed out of the chair and shuffled to the window. Perhaps a breath of fresh air would bolster her and cool her burning skin. She had just managed to lift a hand to open the window, when a wave of dizziness overcame her. The room instantly started to spin.

"Please, no," she muttered, moments before her knees gave way and she started to fall. To her surprise, someone caught her before she hit the ground and gathered her into their arms.

"I am here, my darling, and Doctor Crew will arrive in no time." The voice belonged to Mr. Darcy. "You must lie down."

When he lowered her onto Mrs. Brooks's bed, Elizabeth blinked away the blur in her eyes. She wondered how Mr. Darcy found her. Mrs. Brooks must have gone straight to tell him as Elizabeth had forgotten to ask her not to.

But there was something else she wondered about.

As soon as the pain dissipated, she focused on Mr. Darcy's worried face. Questions started to scramble for space inside her mind. "What...How?"

"It's all right." Mr. Darcy placed a hand on her stomach. "I know what you want to know, but first you must tell me how you feel."

Elizabeth swallowed through her parched throat. "Strangely better." She could still feel the pain, but it had weakened. She narrowed her eyes. "How did you know I was falling?" He had appeared at her side at exactly the right moment and at great speed.

Mr. Darcy kissed her softly on the forehead and swept back the damp locks glued to her skin. "I saw you with my own eyes," he whispered. "I saw you, Elizabeth Darcy."

Elizabeth felt another nudge of pain but ignored it. "I do not

understand what you mean. You could not have seen me.”

He took her hand in his. “I have been keeping a secret from you, for quite some time actually.”

Elizabeth lifted her head from the pillow, her head spinning again, but this time with confusion. “You can see?”

“Indeed, my love. I seem to see more and more each day.”

“But how?” Elizabeth’s heart had started to race. For someone so weak, her voice was surprisingly strong. “How is it possible? And how did I not know of this?” She thought back to the past days and weeks, wondering if she had missed any signs.

“I did not want to tell you until I was completely sure. I did not want to give you unnecessary hope only to have it snatched away.” Mr. Darcy inquired again about Elizabeth’s condition and she insisted she felt fine. She begged for him to continue speaking as it was a good distraction from her discomfort.

As they waited for Dr. Crew to arrive, Mr. Darcy held Elizabeth as he launched into the story of his blindness and recovery.

He told her about the sensations he had experienced in his eyes and how they had given him hope that soon turned to doubt when doctors claimed he was imagining it. “But in the months after Mr. Wickham’s arrest,” he said, “I have been seeing more than just shadows. During my long walks, I was able to tell where I was going without the help of my walking stick.”

A smile spread across Elizabeth’s lips and erased any remnants of discomfort inside her body. “Can you see my face?”

“My vision is blurred, but yes, I can see your beauty.” Mr. Darcy placed a hand on Elizabeth’s cheek. “I find it hard to believe it myself. Two days ago, I met with a different doctor who did not think I was going mad. He saw signs that I must be recovering my sight. I still had my doubts, but it took me seeing you standing at that window to know it’s true. I do not even mind if this is it, if I have to live with a blurred vision. It is far better than darkness.”

At hearing all that Mr. Darcy had to say, Elizabeth was so overwhelmed with emotions that she burst into tears, barely able to utter a coherent word until Dr. Crew arrived.

After examining her, he extended a warm smile. “I do not believe there is anything to be concerned about,” he said. “Especially since you no longer feel pain. Perhaps, you must have eaten something that disagrees with you.”

The doctor reminded Elizabeth that she should continue to lie in as much as possible and refrain from overexerting herself to prepare for the birth.

After he left, and Elizabeth was back in her own bed, she looked into Mr. Darcy’s eyes again.

She felt almost breathless with joy. Her earlier pain was only a memory.

She could not believe that her wishes were coming true all at once. The greatest of her wishes had always been that Mr. Darcy would be able to see their child when she brought it into the world. She could not even find it inside herself to be upset with him for keeping his eye troubles a secret from her.

Her faith in miracles was completely renewed.

Exhausted from all the excitement of the night, she eventually closed her eyes and fell asleep with a smile on her face and Mr. Darcy's arm around her. This time, she was able to sleep without disturbance.

Chapter 20

Elizabeth wept with joy as Mrs. Garvey, the midwife placed not one, but two newborn babies into her arms, one after the other.

After struggling to produce a child for such a long time, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth would have been more than content with one child, and that was what they had expected, but as she held the children in her arms, Elizabeth felt that being blessed with more children was a reward for their patience.

"I cannot believe I carried two sons without knowing it." She gazed into the small, flushed faces of her children, barely able to see the features since her eyes were filled with tears. She watched in awe as her two boys curled their tiny hands into fists. "How could I be this lucky?"

"It happens more often than you can imagine. Congratulations, Mrs. Darcy," Mrs. Garvey said, clearly proud to have helped bring them into the world. "They are absolutely beautiful.

Elizabeth smiled up at her. "They are." She glanced at Charity, who was about to leave the room with a bowl of water. "Would you be so kind and ask Mr. Darcy to come in?"

"Of course, Mrs. Darcy." Charity beamed.

When Mr. Darcy arrived in the room, his brow was drenched in sweat, after hours of waiting to hear that the birth of his child had been successful. When he saw the children in Elizabeth's arms, he halted in the doorway.

"Please tell me I'm not seeing double," he said, his voice almost a croak.

"No, my dear husband. Your vision is perfectly fine. Come and meet your sons." Although Mr. Darcy's vision was still slightly blurred, it continued to clear by the day, and he was able to see anything that wasn't too far away from him. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were grateful for his sight every single day.

"I shall leave you alone," Mrs. Garvey said and left the room.

Mr. Darcy entered the room but halted again, watching Elizabeth and the children, still unable to believe what he was seeing. "Sons? Two sons?" He started laughing out loud. "How in the world is this

possible?"

"I do not know. Mrs. Garvey said it happens quite often." Elizabeth smiled down at the children. "I do hope it's not a problem that I have given you more than one child to love."

"How could it ever be a problem?" Mr. Darcy was still grinning from ear to ear as he made his way to the bed, then he simply stood there, unsure what to do next. "They are too small. I fear I might break them."

"Do not be fooled. Our sons are stronger than you think," Elizabeth said. "Just think of the hard journey they traveled to get to us."

"You're right." Mr. Darcy sat next to Elizabeth, kissed her, then took one of his sons and then the other in his arms. "Thank you for these gifts." When he met Elizabeth's gaze, his eyes were glazed with tears. "The only time I remember being this happy was when I married you."

"I can say the same for myself. I have a feeling that our sons will bring us even more joy than we ever thought possible."

Mr. Darcy simply smiled and walked with the twins to the window where the morning light lit up their faces even more. "Welcome to Pemberley, my boys," he said. "We have been waiting a long time for you to arrive."

"They could not have arrived at a better time." Elizabeth shifted in bed to get comfortable, ignoring the leftover pains of childbirth. As much as she had prayed and hoped to give birth not long after they were married, watching Mr. Darcy seeing his children for the first time was a gift she never knew she would receive. If she had brought them into the world months and years earlier, his blindness would have prevented them from enjoying the moment fully.

"What do we name them?" she asked.

"Since you did all the hard work, I suggest you choose."

"With your permission, I would love to name them Allan and Frederick Darcy."

"You have my permission, Mrs. Darcy."



ONCE AN APPROPRIATE TIME had passed for Elizabeth to recover from the birth, a lavish dinner was organized at Pemberley and attended by family members and close friends.

Mr. Darcy's beloved sister, Georgina Darcy, who like Kitty, spent most of her time traveling, was able to attend. Lady Catherine was invited as well. After sending Elizabeth more letters of apology and gifts for the children, Elizabeth had decided to finally forgive her completely and from the heart, and welcome her back at Pemberley.

As long as she did not show up uninvited. Elizabeth did not want to taint her joy by holding on to a grudge.

The moment Lady Catherine met Allan and Frederick, she was completely smitten. Even at a young age, the twins had transformed Lady Catherine into a much gentler person than Elizabeth had come to know.

Everyone enjoyed the dinner, and not once did Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet say an unkind word to the other.

During dessert, to everyone's surprise, Kitty announced she was getting married.

"Is that so?" Mr. Bennet asked with a deep chuckle. "I do not recall any gentlemen coming to ask for your hand in marriage. Unless, of course, old age is catching up with me."

"He shall pay you a visit soon enough, but you will all be happy to hear he is a gentleman and a kind doctor from London, who enjoys travel as much as I do. I have already agreed to marry him."

"That is not how things are done, Kitty," Mrs. Bennet scolded, but Elizabeth could tell that she was relieved to hear the news. On more than one occasion, she had shared her fears that Kitty might never marry.

A mischievous smile appeared on Kitty's face. "Mama, since when do I do things the proper way?"

Everyone at the table laughed, including Mrs. Bennet.

"Well then, we should start organizing the wedding as soon as we return to Longbourn." Mrs. Bennet clasped her hands together. "We shall get you married by Christmas."

After everyone had congratulated Kitty, Elizabeth sat back to take in the beauty of the moment. She felt as though her life was complete.

Days after the dinner at Pemberley, Kitty introduced Doctor Timothy Clark to their parents, who embraced him at once. A few short weeks after that, the Bennets celebrated another wedding.

The day of Kitty's wedding, Elizabeth felt fortunate that they had all survived their own personal struggles—especially Lydia, who had recovered enough to find the courage to move back into the cottage she had shared with Mr. Wickham. He was still in prison, but had written to inform her that after her betrayal, he no longer considered her his wife. Instead of being upset, Lydia had been relieved. She told Elizabeth that after what she had experienced in their marriage, she no longer wished to marry. Instead, she would spend her life focusing on raising her children.

Elizabeth wished her sister well and told her to do what brought her happiness. In the end, that was all that mattered. Elizabeth was glad to have found her own joy and wished the people she loved the same. With her husband and her sons, her life was complete. All she

wished for now was that her good fortune would last a lifetime.

THE END

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